

Let's begin with prayer. . .

*Loving God, who opens our hearts to the mysteries of faith in ordinary and extraordinary moments, come near to us today. Make known among us and within us your strength, that we might experience your power that uses what the powers of this world call weakness to demonstrate your Almighty love to all creation. Amen.*

*(Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, April 2024)*



Our scripture for today found in 2 Corinthians 12:8-10 (NIRV) which says:

*<sup>8</sup> Three times I begged the Lord to take it away from me. <sup>9</sup> But he said to me, "My grace is all you need. My power is strongest when you are weak." So I am very happy to brag about how weak I am. Then Christ's power can rest on me.*

*<sup>10</sup> Because of how I suffered for Christ, I'm glad that I am weak. I am glad in hard times. I am glad when people say mean things about me. I am glad when things are difficult. And I am glad when people make me suffer. When I am weak, I am strong.*

"Show no weakness." It's a message we get from all sectors of life. From high school football games, to courtrooms, to closed-door arguments with people we love, we're taught consciously and subconsciously to show no weakness, no cracks in our armor, no sign that we're limited or incapable, no inkling that—heaven forbid—we realize we've been wrong.

And then, here comes Paul writing letters that say things like, "*So I am very happy to brag about how weak I am. Then Christ's power can rest on me.*" (2 Cor 12:9b).

Robert Fulghum made a bit of a splash some years ago with his book titled *All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. It may have begun as an internet forward, one of those emails that gets picked up and sent again and again.

It was a poem of sorts, a list of proverbs about life in its simplest. It was a pretty good list, including things like "Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody." It was a poem that became a book and then became a series of books.

This last week of our "Open Your Heart" series asks us to consider living with weakness and with strength. It takes an amazing amount of humility to recognize that some of the most important teachings of life are pretty basic and really simple—like faith.

The truth is - faith is really simple. It's not easy, unfortunately, but it is simple.

- Love God; love neighbor. Simple.
- Do as you would have others do to you. Simple.
- Let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe. Simple.

But not easy. And why is it not easy? Because we don't know how, or we think we know how and don't want to learn. Or we think we used to know and refuse to be taught again. Or we think we should just be able to do it, to live the kind of life we long for without effort, without training and discipline. And maybe we should be able to. But we aren't. We don't. We can't. We don't know enough. Or stuff gets in the way. Irritations distract us. Difficulties derail us. Suffering prevents us.

Paul was struggling with a problem. He kept asking Jesus to make the problem go away. But, instead of fixing Paul's problem, Jesus said, *"My grace is all you need. My power is strongest when you are weak."* Jesus knew that if he made the problem go away, Paul wouldn't continue to pray for Jesus' Spirit to give him strength.



It is the human condition to suffer, to have things go wrong. How can we be expected to live the kind of life Jesus lived in front of us when stumbling blocks rise in front of us regularly? How can we expect to bask in the glory of God when our wrestling wounds cause us to limp with every step? If only we could live a life free from conflict, free from pain, then we could be the kind of Christian we see in others. Like Paul for instance.

Paul was pushed into a corner; his credentials were being questioned. "Who do you think you are?" That was the question bandied about. Well, actually, it was probably more like, "Who does he think he is?" Because it was done behind his back. His critics showed up and were trying to tell the new Christians that Paul wasn't worth listening to, that they were much better at this Christian life thing than he was. He had no special authority, no special powers, no insight into what it means to follow Jesus Christ.

In answer to all of this, Paul had to tell about his experiences and his knowledge. He had to tell his own story, toot his own horn for a while. "I don't boast," he said, "but if I did, I'd tell you about this and that and the other thing. I don't brag, but if I did, I'd tell you about where I've been and what I've seen." He had to do it, didn't want to, but he did—for a chapter and a half.

But just when you might think he had the critics all shamed for besmirching his character, he makes an abrupt shift here in verse seven of chapter twelve. "A thorn in the flesh," he writes, a weakness, a pain, a failing.

Humility was important to Paul, maybe because he struggled with it. Maybe because he knew how important it was. Maybe because he knew that the surest sign of getting off track was losing sight of who was in charge, even of your own life. "To keep from being too elated," too puffed up, too full of himself, "a thorn was given me in the flesh."

What was it? We don't know. Commentators speculate on it still to this day. Some assumed that the Corinthians knew what it was, so he didn't need to mention it. Others say it doesn't matter. Some say it was physical - a disability of some sort, a recurring disease; others claim it was psychological - bouts of depression; some think it was social - the messenger of Satan was a detractor who kept nipping at his heels wherever he went; still others think it was spiritual - a temptation he couldn't

shake, a nagging doubt or fear. It doesn't really matter. Insert your own thorn here. Whatever it is that you struggle with, whatever it is that makes you fall short of even your own ideals.

Paul's point here, like his point earlier, is not really to draw attention to himself —despite what it might sound like as you read these verses. He is inviting us to see an opportunity for humility.

As children many of us learned a song about our weakness and God's strength: "*Jesus Loves Me.*"



Jesus loves me this I know. For the Bible tells me so.

Little ones to him belong. They (we) are weak, but he is strong.

Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me.

Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so.

When you are hurting, when you are weak, that's the moment when you might finally realize that you need help, that you need to learn, that you need something you can't supply for yourself.

This thorn in the flesh is a tool, a teaching tool to keep Paul focused on the source of goodness and wholeness and joy in his life. And it isn't himself or his accomplishments. It is the God who saves him, the God he experiences in the life of the community of faith, the God who speaks to him through many voices and in many moments.

Notice too that this thorn doesn't come from God. God doesn't cause suffering to get us to pay attention or to change our ways or our thinking—despite what some loud voices in our world today are trying to tell us. Suffering isn't punishment. But God can use any occasion, any circumstance to help us grow and learn, if we pay attention, if we ask in humility what we could learn.

Join with me in this responsive prayer of confession:

**Leader:** Merciful God, of what do we boast? Can we truly say with Paul that we do not boast about ourselves or our achievements? Does the danger in such thinking lie in the next step—the thought that we can do anything, or all things—by ourselves?

**People:** **Forgive us the times when we ignore you, O God, and depend on our own strength to do things our own way.**

**Leader:** Paul talks about power being made perfect in weakness.

**People:** **Forgive us for believing that we have to be hard and domineering if we want to get ahead in life.**

**Leader:** Paul says that he boasts of his weaknesses so that the power of Christ may dwell in him.

**People:** **Forgive us when we use our power selfishly or aggressively, ignoring that indwelling, Christ-given power which frees us to be vulnerable.**

**Leader:** Jesus says "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." Permeate our lives with your grace, Lord, so that we can affirm with Paul that we are content with weaknesses for your sake, and fill us with the knowledge that it is when we allow ourselves to be empowered by you, that we are truly strong.

**People:** **Amen.**

***For those attending the worship service in person,*** Like last week, again I have provided some paper hearts and pens which you will find in your pews, and I invite you to consider how God is calling you to name and recognize your own weaknesses. Write it down on the heart and I ask you to come forward at the end of the service to attach the hearts to the pieces of string hanging on the altar railings.

**For those who receive the sermons by mail or who attend the worship service on-line**, I invite you to take a piece of paper you have at home and cut it into a heart shape, then consider how God is calling you to name and recognize your own weaknesses. Write it down on the piece of paper.

Then you can do one of two things:

- 1) you can mail it to the church (*Empire UMC, PO Box 223, Empire, MI 49630*) and I will add it to our strings hanging on the altar railing at the church,  
or
- 2) you can tape it to your bathroom mirror to remind you each day to pray about it.



May we open our hearts in showing our weaknesses in humbleness to God, knowing that God loves us —not *in spite of*— but *in* our weakness.

#### **Let us pray...**

*Merciful God, in this time of reflection and offering, we acknowledge our weaknesses and limitations, knowing that it is through our struggles that we learn humility and dependence on you. We bring our vulnerabilities to you, trusting in your grace to transform our weaknesses into strengths for the work of your kingdom. Amen.*

#### **Benediction**

May you go from this place blessed with divine contentment in the deep and beautiful knowledge that in all things, the power of the crucified and resurrected Christ dwells in you. Amen.

*(Benediction written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, April 2024)*