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Powerfully Powerless

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Whether we like it or not, we live in a society that prizes and puts a premium on winning and success. We idolise victors, people who overcome adversity through strength and effort. We have little time for and can't be bothered to remember the one who comes in last. And no one likes to be powerless or weak.

Except maybe Paul in today's New Testament lectionary reading from 2 Corinthians. His premise runs counter to common wisdom and belief – weaknesses, he says, are good. In fact, he will go on to boast about them. He goes on to add the thorn in his side, persecutions and hardships to the list. What on earth would he do that for? Why would anyone want to tell others about our weaknesses and imperfections? It goes against the grain of our culture, which compels us to conceal our weaknesses, not boast about them. Focus on strengths, minimise shortcomings. Definitely don't admit when you don't know the answer, just wing it. "Fake it 'til you make it." Putting weakness on display is not in the script. That would make us incredibly vulnerable, open to criticism, and less likely to succeed. Could you imagine applying Paul's advice to your next job interview? Go in and lay out all your weaknesses, boast about the skills you lack. It's probably a dead certainty that this tactic won't get you very far.

So what is prompting Paul's position? Paul already had a relationship with the church in Corinth, which had been through challenges and complications, akin to many of the early churches, struggling with what it meant to live as a community of faith, particularly in circumstances where cultures and habits collided. But rather than focusing on these issues, this epistle goes in a different direction. Paul defends his own position as an apostle, against what could be described as "superapostles", exercising a ministry markedly different in style and approach from his own. These leaders were asserting themselves in ways that Paul was not – from accepting financial support from the Corinthians for their ministry to simply being more charismatic in their visits. Rather than try to go "toe to toe" with these other leaders, Paul chooses another route: to use his perceived weakness as a strength.

Counterintuitive, isn't it? Certainly not the expected response of a leader whose position is being threatened. But Paul's choice isn't an oversight in church politics. Paul is a skilled rhetorician and pushes his readers into considering something more. The theologian Karl Barth, in his book "On Religion" describes it in this way:

"What is his weakness? Simply what remains of his Christian existence after it is stripped of the religious experience of which he could boast for good reason and in truth, but that means insults, hardships, persecutions, calamities for Christ's sake (v. 10). There he sees the *power* of Christ dwelling in him; there he knows himself to be *strong*; there is what he *boasts* about."

Boasting about weakness is an entry point for Paul into boasting about God. Rather than taking an "I can do it all myself" attitude, allowing himself to be weak means that he is open to receiving help from someone far more powerful and strong – Jesus Christ. In essence, it is Paul getting out of the way of himself, out of the way of pride, so that God's strength can be seen more clearly and the church can get away from power struggles and spend time focusing more on developing its faith. In this text, he presents humility almost as hyperbole as one way of getting there.

In prayers of confession that we sometimes use in liturgy, we admit that we don't have it all together. Most importantly, we

invite God into the midst of our sin and ask for forgiveness, healing, and grace. We trust that God's grace does prevail and that we are forgiven. This is the beautiful image captured in the 19th century hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty," written by pastor and missionary Reginald Heber for use on Trinity Sunday. In it, all of creation celebrates the eternal power of the God, with voices united in endless praise.

Rather than relying on our own power, which we know to be limited, we rely on God's, which we know to be infinite. In order to fully understand what God's love and grace is about, we have to abandon our own way of thinking. To be "powerless" and "weak," if you will, like Paul. However, we must do so with care, for there are some tempting and common traps that we can fall into if we take boasting in weakness too far.

We can get hung up on our list of weaknesses. Overachievers among us will be tempted to create a long list of imperfections about which to boast, because if we have to be weak, we might as well be the best at it, right? The film buffs among you may recall in "Notting Hill", this activity even becomes a dinner party game, with the person who has the saddest story winning the last remaining brownie during dessert. It happens in real life, too. Everyone knows someone who always has to "one up" any story you tell. Good or bad, this person always seems to have had a life experience that's just a touch more extreme than your story. This is boasting in weakness, but it's not what Paul is talking about.

For Paul, the boasting is only a means of entry, a way of reminding ourselves who is really in charge in the world – God. So, we shouldn't get caught up in naming or proclaiming our weaknesses either. It's not about us, after all. Instead, we should think about inviting God into those weak areas of our lives. Boasting in weakness means opening the doors and making space for God to work within us. Because when we get out of our own way, checking pride at the door, we are better able to dwell with Christ in an honest relationship that truly makes us strong.

We can fall into the trap of using our weaknesses as an excuse for not acting in the world. We can say "Oh, I'm weak. I can't possibly do that. It's just not in my skill set." Eventually with this pattern, we wind up not doing anything at all. God doesn't promise to swoop in where we are weak and just fix things for us. I can't simply say "I am a really slow runner and tire out quickly," and then expect the Holy Spirit to do its thing and suddenly help me run a marathon, although there have been times in my marathon running where that would have been very welcome! Again, film buffs may remember the scene from the film "Evan Almighty" in which God, going undercover as a fellow diner at a restaurant, speaks with Evan's wife. She is lamenting how hard things are sometimes and is looking for answers that don't seem to be coming anytime soon. God, portrayed by Morgan Freeman, poses some questions back to her: "If someone prays for patience, you think God gives them patience? Or does he give them the opportunity to be patient? If he prayed for courage, does God give him courage, or does he give him opportunities to be courageous? If someone prayed for the family to be closer, do you think God zaps them with warm fuzzy feelings, or does he give them opportunities to love each other?"

Something similar could be said in the way God works through our weaknesses. When we admit them, does God simply come in and patch things up, or does God give us the opportunity to work on them, promising love and support through the Holy Spirit and through others, so that we can, with God's help, be made strong? Our strength comes from God, who made heaven and earth, and each one of us in God's own image. God has promised to continue to strengthen us in all we say and in all we do. God doesn't promise that it will be easy, doesn't assure us that we won't be weak. Rather, God promises to be with us even in our weakness. Through Christ, we are assured that none of us have to endure hardship alone. Suffering is neither God's design nor the end result.

Paul complained about the "thorn in his side", which he begged God to remove. God's reply is simple, "my grace is sufficient." That grace comes from Jesus Christ, who conquers all. By grace, God sent Christ into the world, to walk with us, to strengthen us and show us how to live, to heal us, and most importantly, to save us. This is what makes us strong – not anything we do or don't do, but God's grace alone. It is a gift, ready and waiting for each one of us, if we can be like Paul and boast in our weaknesses, getting out of our own way so that Christ may dwell more fully within us and work for transformation and reconciliation in our lives and in the world. When we are grounded not in our own egos and agendas but in truly seeking to embody our Saviour, it is then where we will find the power and strength to live into our calling as followers of Jesus.

