

**Peace in the Valley:
“Valley of Weakness”
Luke 6:17-19**

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“Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. ...For when I am weak, then I am strong” (II Corinthians 12:9-10).

Let me tell you a very personal story. As a kid I was bullied a lot by older siblings and teased to tears almost daily by adults who somehow saw something humorous about intimidating a small child. In elementary school, I stayed to myself and avoided conflicts at all costs with the big eighth graders in that little four room schoolhouse. This flee to safety continued for several years.

Then one day, I put away childish ways, found a better identity, developed self-confidence, and decided to take on the world. For years I championed causes, stood strong for the powerless, and worked my way through denominational politics and local church challenges. Such assertiveness and workaholicism brought me many accolades from the church and community. I became a success, a change agent, a person who knew how to get things done, not a bad resume for a lonely little farm boy who got beat up all the time. But success has its price, and the lonely whine of the top dog began to sound loudly in my soul. Little did I realize then, that the barking of that dog was the hound of heaven nipping at my heels.

You see, it was during that time that the Lord did a marvelous thing for me. He blessed me with His love that was not dependent upon approval, accomplishments, advancement, or any other “A” words that might come to mind. I was loved just as I was, without reserve and without conditions. Unknown to me at that time, it was a marvelous preparation for the biggest battle of my life, the lingering, ongoing, unending war with cancer. As I have waded through the shadows of death these past eleven years, I have been constantly comforted by the words of St. Paul in II Corinthians 12:9: *“My grace is sufficient for you. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”* That is what I would like to talk about today.

TO BE WEAK IS TO BE HUMAN

“A great number of people from all over Judea, came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases.”

Let me pose a question, “Why is it so hard to own our weaknesses?” Is it because Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer continue to teach us “natural selection” and the “survival of the fittest?” Is that the name of life’s game?

Just as stronger animals seem to outlast and eventually control the weaker ones, so does it stand to reason that stronger humans will always rise to the top and make decisions

for the weaker persons in society? Is this the way God intended things to be? Does might make right and the strong set standards to the detriment of the weak? Is this the best we can hope for humanity?

Society appears to affirm it. The opening line of a new book I have coming out next month quotes a motorcycle commercial featuring dogs pulling a dog sled. Underneath is this caption, "Unless you are the lead dog, the scenery is always the same."

Try telling an Olympic Gold Medalist there is very little difference between her swim time and those who win no medal at all. See if she agrees. How would you feel about the grand old USA if we were not the Super Power of the world? Would we feel safe if our Star Wars Military Might were second to other countries around us?

I was following a Lexus down the road Friday with bold letters proclaiming a church in Clarksville to be the "Church of Champions." While I am not into such church advertisements, for a moment I wished I could pass him in my wife's 8-year-old Honda advertising Brentwood United Methodist as "A Church for Sinners."

The Bible takes a different slant on strength and weakness. *"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly in my weakness, so that Christ's power may rest on me."* These are hard words, probing words, wonderful words of life.

God is not looking for persons who are perfect, but people who are human, bendable, moldable, shapeable, and willing to go with him all the way. Samson was the strongest man who ever lived, but he crumbled a building to his own demise. Pilate was in control of the court that sentenced Jesus to death, but today we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ not the victory of Pontius Pilate.

Over the years, I've interviewed a lot of potential employees. I've yet to have one honestly answer the question, "Tell me about your weaknesses?" They might tell me they are perfectionists, hoping I'm looking for a better quality of work. They might say I'm a workaholic hoping I'm trying to hire hard labor, but nobody has ever looked me in the eye and said, "I don't know if I can do this job or not. It scares me to death, but I am willing to try if you decide to take a chance on me."

TO BE WEAK IS TO BE NEEDY

"Blessed are the poor, the hungry, and those who weep now."

Kind of a sorry lot, wouldn't you say? Which brings me to my second question, "Why is it so hard to ask for help?" To be human is to be wounded. Nature and history so easily have their way with us, bruising our lives with tragedy, piercing our souls with pain, but far too often we choose to bear it alone.

We feel lonely, but we do not seek support and comfort. We feel angry, but we know no safe person with whom to share it. We are scared to death, but admitting our fears to others leaves us even more frightened. We are needy, but who has time to hear our cry for help?

So we bear our burdens alone. “I don’t want to bother my friends with my problems; they have enough problems of their own.” So we sink into isolation and abandon the community. Or even worse, we bury our woundedness deep in the soul only to have it fester and bring pain to others.

Someone passed along an e-mail to me this week telling about a mean-spirited woman criticizing a child when he asked for ice cream during his prayer at a restaurant. “That’s what’s wrong with this country,” snapped the woman. “Kids today don’t even know how to pray.” But a kind, old gentleman came to the rescue. He winked at the child and said, “I happen to know that God thought that was a great prayer. A little ice cream is good for the soul.” Sure enough, when the little boy got his ice cream, he picked up his sundae and walked over to the woman, placed it in front of her and said, “Here, this is for you. Ice cream is good for the soul sometimes, and my soul is good already.” Thank God for children who cut through the courtesies when people need help.

TO BE WEAK IS TO BECOME A WOUNDED HEALER

Which brings me to my third question, “Will our wounds destroy us or awaken us?”

Henri Nouwen wrote his book In Memoriam, in an effort to express his feelings of sorrow following his mother’s death. A reporter asked him why he worked so hard to express his pain. To which Henri replied, “I always try to turn my personal struggles into something helpful for others.”

We cannot always escape our pains, but we can mobilize them into a common search for life, so that those very pains are transformed from expressions of despair into signs of hope.

That’s what the phrase “wounded healer” implies. It means to identify the suffering in our own hearts in such a way that they become avenues of service to others. Fundamentally, it is not enough to know that someone sympathizes with us. It is not enough to know that someone cares. We need to know that someone has been there. For if they can pass through the waters without drowning, stand the heat without collapsing, maybe I can too.

Martin Niemoller was a German pastor during the Second World War. His resistance to the Nazi’s got him thrown into the concentration camp at Dachau. The gallows from which many of his fellow prisoners were hanged stood right outside his cell. Martin writes, “How often I stood there looking at those gallows thinking, “If these people come after me, I shall shout at them saying you criminals, you murderers, wait and see, there is a God in heaven and he will show you a thing or two about justice.” Then I would think, “What would have happened if Jesus, when they nailed him to the Cross had cursed his enemies? I guess nothing would have happened except there would be no Gospel, no Christian Church, no message of great joy, no road to forgiveness for you and me. Nothing would have happened, but everything would have changed.”

See from His head, His hands, His feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down. Hear with your ears His promise *“of grace sufficient for every need.”* Learn in your life that *“God’s power is made perfect in our weakness,”* and that will be enough. *“For when I am weak, then I am strong.”*