

10-7-18—Emotional Baggage: “I Have No Power.” (20th Sunday after Pentecost)

I’ve got a microphone, and I’d like a volunteer to come up... and share all of their weaknesses and struggles with everyone. What, no takers? That’s not overly surprising. We don’t really like highlighting our weaknesses and struggles, right? Most people try burying their weaknesses so no one else sees them. And we certainly don’t celebrate our weaknesses!

That’s why it’s so shocking to hear the Apostle Paul write in our sermon text, **“Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses.”** Not only did Paul put his weaknesses and struggles front and center for everyone to see, he celebrated his weaknesses.

Although we don’t usually celebrate and boast about our weaknesses like Paul, the truth is, we all have them. And not just minor annoyances, but major struggles that can leave us feeling absolutely powerless. Like the crushing feelings of powerlessness stemming from anxiety or depression. Or poverty that leaves people feeling powerless to improve their lives. Or the shackles of addiction that leave people feeling powerless to be set free.

Every single one of us struggles with something. If Mount Olive tracks with the national averages, 1 out of 6 of us struggle with anxiety. 1 out of 15 struggle with major depression. In the last decade, the number of children diagnosed with clinical depression has risen 200%. 1 out of 8 struggle with alcoholism. 1 out of 15 struggle with drug addictions. 1 out of 7 Christians over age 13 view pornography at least monthly. 1 out of 8 are struggling in poverty.

All of us carry the emotional baggage of feeling powerless; powerless to change ourselves, or our situation, or to break free from unrelenting hopelessness.

So, how can we, like Paul, find power-- not just power to get rid of our weaknesses—but how can we even find power in our weaknesses?

The first step is properly understanding God’s purpose for the weaknesses we struggle with. The Apostle Paul was one of God’s most successful missionaries, carrying the gospel and starting Christian churches all over the known world. He had plenty of reasons to think of himself pretty highly! And on top of that, in the verses before our sermon text, Paul reveals that God allowed him to catch a glimpse of Heaven, hearing and seeing **“inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.”**

Think how tempting it must have been for Paul to focus on how important and powerful he was after all that! Imagine how easily you could become conceited and self-centered if God allowed you to experience things no one else had experienced? So, God also allowed Paul to experience... weakness and struggle.

Paul reports, **“There was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me.”** He doesn’t tell us much about this “thorn in the flesh.” Some commentators believe it was bad eyesight, malaria, migraines or countless other ailments. Ultimately, we don’t know what it was. Ultimately, it doesn’t matter. What matters is why God gave Paul this painful, nagging physical weakness that he was powerless to control. Paul explains it was **“to keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations.”** God knew that for Paul’s spiritual good, and the good of God’s kingdom, Paul needed to keep trusting in God’s power, instead of trusting in Paul’s power. So God allows Paul to struggle in weakness.

The same can be said about our weaknesses and struggles. People face two kinds of weakness. Some result from our own sinful actions. The porn addict, drug addict, or alcoholic struggle with the powerlessness of addiction because their sinful actions compounded into addiction.

But sometimes, like Paul's thorn in the flesh, God permits struggles that don't result from sinful actions. Like a chemical imbalance or genetic predispositions that make some more susceptible to depression or anxiety. But the same God that allows struggles and weakness promises to **"make all things work out for the good of those who love him."** Like for Paul, God allows us to experience weaknesses and struggles to keep us trusting in him for our strength, instead of trusting in ourselves.

Ultimately, people react to weakness in three different ways. One is God's road to follow. The other two are the "ditches" people fall into on either side.

The first ditch I call the "bootstraps" mentality. It's the thought that when you face struggle and weakness in your life, you need to pull yourself up by your bootstraps, and figure out how to solve the problem yourself. The first thing bootstraps people think is, "I'm strong enough to handle this." It's a popular mindset, because it allows people to feel strong and in control.

The problem is, sometimes we aren't strong enough, or our strength eventually fails. Addictions affect a person's brain chemistry in ways that make it nearly impossible to simply "try harder" and break the addiction. In fact, experts agree that a person's first step to recovery is admitting their problem and need for help.

It's like someone trying to bench press way more weight than they can lift. As he brings the bar off the rack, the weight comes crashing down on him. He needs a spotter, someone strong enough to remove the weight that's crushing him. But as a strong man comes to save him, he chokes out, "I'm strong enough to handle this!" So stubbornly self-reliant that he gets crushed under the weight while brushing away the one strong enough to save him.

A bootstraps mentality, with its self-reliant, repeated failures inevitably leads people into the other ditch: the ditch of despair and hopelessness. The first thing hopeless people think is, "I have no power."

When someone feels powerless, they give up, viewing their weaknesses as their fate or death sentence; resigning themselves to a powerless life of addiction, struggle, hopelessness, and despair.

Picture another man being crushed under the weight of the bench press. But instead of self-reliantly brushing the strong man away, this man sees himself as powerless, and gives up. Although there are strong spotters around to save him, he doesn't call out for help, because he's given up. Because he thinks he's hopeless, he just lets the weight crush him.

Neither the bootstraps ditch or the ditch of despair help us properly deal with weaknesses. Why not? Where do both mentalities focus? The first word that comes from peoples' mouths in both ditches is... I. "I can do this myself," or "I have no power." That's why neither work. God doesn't allow us to struggle so we'll trust in ourselves, but so we'll put our trust...in him. When you're struggling under the weight of weakness, don't let the first words out of your mouth be, "I." Let them be, "Jesus." Because I'm not powerful enough. But Jesus is!

That's what Paul did. When the thorn in the flesh left him powerless, he didn't trust in his own strength, nor did he give up hope. He turned to God. **"Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me."** Paul knew that although he wasn't powerful enough to deal with his weakness, God was. So Paul taps into daily God-given power, by bringing his weaknesses to the Almighty God in prayer. Persistently, like the widow in Jesus' parable, Paul pleads with the God who promises to **"bring about justice for his chosen ones."** In

weakness, use the power of prayer God has given you! The God of the universe promises to hear and answer you!

But it seems like God doesn't answer Paul's prayer, right? Paul asked God to remove the thorn, but he didn't. Maybe you've felt the same way about the thorns in your life. Maybe you've prayed for healing from disease, or freedom from addiction. Maybe you've pleaded with God to take away your depression, or bring you out of poverty. But nothing seems to change. So, where's the power in our weakness?

God's power is revealed in his response to Paul. ***"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*** God answered Paul's prayer, he just answered differently. In perfect wisdom, God knew that Paul's thorn in the flesh was actually good for him and his ministry. His weakness helped Paul trust in God's strength, instead of his own. His weakness helped people see that Paul's message wasn't powerful because of this weakened man, but because of the Almighty God!

When God assured Paul his grace was "sufficient," he wasn't saying it was "good enough." That Greek word means that although Paul's weakness remained, God's grace was enough to leave Paul completely content and satisfied. God's undeserved love was all the strength Paul needed.

And the same is true for us. Whether God removes your thorns or not, his grace provides all the power you need. You see, the middle road God wants us to follow is not to say, "I'm powerful enough" or "I have no power." When we struggle with weakness, God wants us to say, "I'm not powerful enough. But my Jesus is." Human weakness provides the perfect opportunity for God's almighty power to shine through. Our weakness turns us not to our weak sinful selves, but to our almighty, gracious God!

But maybe you're still skeptical about "power made perfect in weakness." Maybe you feel like you've experienced more weakness than power in your life. So why should you believe that God's power is made perfect in weakness? Because of Jesus. Because Jesus is the ultimate perfect example of power made perfect in weakness.

The Almighty God, who became a powerless baby; who grew up to be beaten and suffer in weakness. A man whose body became supremely weak in death, powerless to resist the grave. But from that weakness came the greatest power imaginable—the power to destroy Satan and his demons; to shatter the shackles of sin; to send death fleeing in defeat. In Christ's weakness was the power to win eternal life for a world powerless to save itself. Christ's gracious power was made perfect in weakness. And you were made perfect, through that power and weakness!

By God's grace, through faith in your Savior Jesus, you're connected to the greatest power imaginable. The Almighty God, who reigns over everything, is your strength and your power.

That means that we too can rejoice in our weaknesses. Because our weaknesses lead us to the Almighty God for our strength. Take hope, comfort, and assurance in the face of every weakness and struggle, as Paul did.

"When I am weak, then I am strong."

I will boast in my weaknesses, for Christ is my strength.