

July 5, 2015 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

The Power of Weakness

Ezekiel 2:1-5 *And when God spoke, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet...*

2 Corinthians 12:1-10 *So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses...*

Mark 6:1-6 *And they took offense at him.*

I think that one of the most important areas of our inward journey work as followers of Jesus and as human beings is learning what is true strength and power. This also means transforming how we look at perceived weaknesses or imperfections. We live in a culture dominated by values of nationalistic pride, military strength, economic power, individual competitive achievement, and physical beauty narrowly defined. Instead of facing our real weaknesses or needs, we tend to be in denial of them. That is why it is still so difficult for us to admit the racism that permeates our history and society. In the area of religion, we may be finally learning, through pain and suffering, that religious extremism, with its violence and ignorance, can be found in every major spiritual tradition, including our own. The biblical message, however, about God and Jesus speaks of strength and power in completely different ways. To be followers of Jesus means that we have to work with that difference within our own lives and our life as a faith community. Let us skim through our readings for today with this in mind.

The prophet Ezekiel has an experience of the utter holiness of God that causes him to fall on his face. **It is the appropriate human response to awareness of the sacredness of life.** It is the humility of seeing our smallness within the vast reality of life. While lying there, Ezekiel hears a voice, the voice of God, calling him to stand up. As he listens to the voice-- from within himself or outside of himself, we do not know—a spirit enters him and lifts him to his feet. It is an amazing picture! When we experience the deep humility of being in God's presence, the sacred Presence that permeates all of life, we bow down in our sense of smallness or unworthiness or wonder. Then a spirit from God enters us to lift us up. The gist of this story seems to be that God does not want us to merely be falling down in awe, but also to stand up and be ready to serve life. For God has something for us to do. A calling. A ministry.

Something for the encouraging, strengthening, healing, or enhancing of the life of God's world. In Ezekiel's case, it was the call to speak God's word to Israel at the time of national collapse and exile. It would be at first a word of judgment, but then a word of comfort and encouragement.

Then there is the apostle Paul, writing to the troubled community in Corinth, a community Paul himself started. He loved that community and was very protective of it. It was a non-Jewish Christian community, composed of Gentiles who had responded positively to the message about Jesus and God's inclusive love. Yet, there were some who were troubling them with doctrines or practices that distracted from the essence of what Jesus was about. Some of these trouble-makers had been attacking Paul, questioning his spiritual credentials and his character.

So, Paul allowed himself to be drawn into a boasting match. He did it deliberately, fully aware that boasting does not suit those who follow Jesus. Paul, however, would do anything to protect those who were being exploited and confused by the trouble-makers. So, Paul wrote of some ecstatic, esoteric spiritual experience he had fourteen years earlier. Curiously, he wrote about it in the third person, as though it happened to someone else, a person he no longer was. Essentially, Paul was saying to those challenging his spiritual status, You can't top that! Paul was trying to beat the trouble-makers at their own game.

However, Paul suddenly turns on a dime and says that such experiences are worthless, and boasting is worthless. Trying to prove ourselves spiritually stronger or superior is ludicrous. What really matters, says Paul, is that I was given this "thorn in the flesh". It is something—we do not know what—that had kept Paul from being "too elated", too "puffed up" about anything. Originally it felt like a curse, and he pleaded with God to take it away. But then he began to see it as a gift, teaching him something very important. Through it, he began to hear Jesus saying to him, My grace is sufficient for you. My strength, my power, is made perfect in weakness. Our perceived weaknesses or deficiencies are actually portals for God's love to enter into and express itself through our lives. Everything is turned on its head. The point of Jesus' life, and death, is that most everything the human world considers strong and powerful is the real weakness. What is looked down upon as weakness, powerlessness, and imperfection is precisely where we find true strength and power. It is where we become open to the power of God's love. So, Paul ends up saying in his letter that, yes, he will boast.

He will boast of his weaknesses so that the power of God's love that is in Jesus will also be in him.

Finally, there is Jesus returning to his hometown of Nazareth. He is all grown up and a pretty famous rabbi. When he teaches in the synagogue, everyone is awed by his knowledge and wisdom. Then the mood changes. Hey, where did he get all this? This is just little Jesus—remember him? We know him and his family. Why, he is just one of us. He's no better than we are. Who does he think he is? Things turn ugly. All Jesus can say is that prophets and teachers are welcome everywhere else but among their own people. The story ends with Jesus unable to do much of anything there because they were not open to him, did not believe in him.

Three stories about weaknesses and limitations and imperfections. Here are some things from them we might reflect on.

A sense of awed humility is essential to living as true human beings. Our inward journey work has to do with getting back in touch with this sense of awe and wonder which, I believe, we were born with but lost along the way. **And yet, there is also the outward journey, God's spirit lifting us up on our feet,** standing us up so that we are ready to do something God is giving us to do for the sake of life around us.

Awed reverence for life and loving service in the world. These two always must go together and be kept in balance. Once Jesus responded to someone who addressed him as “Lord”. What did he say? Do not call me “Lord” if you are not going to do what I ask you to do!(Luke 6:46) I think Jesus would prefer that we stop being so focused on reverencing him as Lord and be more about the life to which he calls us, living as those who love God and want to do God's will in our lives. In other words, being less stuck in religion and more attentive to what religion points us to—living as true human beings, as God created us to live.

All of us have something we feel “stuck” with, like Paul's thorn. We have allowed this to disqualify us, in our own minds, as not worthy, good, useful human beings. We have allowed someone or something to convince us that our lack of something makes us inferior in some way. We have wasted far too much time asking God to remove this thing from us, or just wishing it would somehow go away. A physical limitation. A mental or emotional one. Some wounding experience that has continued to dog us over the years. Some voice in our heads

telling us we are not good enough, intelligent enough, spiritual enough, or whatever. Paul reminds us that this “thorn in the flesh” is there to teach us something very important spiritually. It is the very thing that can help us to experience God's presence and love and power in a real way.

Paul hears Jesus saying that his power, which is God's power of love in him, is made perfect in weakness. Think about that. The Greek word translated as “perfect” (*telos*) also means fulfilled, completed, matured. It does not mean perfect in the way our culture means it—having no flaws, making no mistakes, and so forth. It means wholeness, completeness, being fulfilled. That is a whole different story. It means that our fulness of life, from the perspective of God's love, includes what we consider our weakness or powerlessness or imperfection. When we finally come to the point of accepting the wholeness of who we are, that is when we experience the power and love of God. And that, too, is experienced as a spirit lifting us up and standing us on our feet. We do not wait until we are without problems or struggles or whatever in order to be channels of God's love in the world. We become servants of God's loving purposes as we are.

Our community here has always tried to stress the importance of self-acceptance and acceptance of others. It is a part of membership to being willing to share ourselves with one another, the whole of who we are, not just what we consider the “best parts”. When we embrace the thorns in our flesh and help one another to do so, we experience the power of God in a real way as the power of love. This, in turn, gives power and authenticity to the outward work that we do.

Finally, being spiritually alive means **paying attention so that nothing is ordinary to us, and we can be open to God's speaking to us any time, anywhere, and through anyone or anything**. The folks in Jesus' hometown could not learn anything from Jesus because he was, in their minds, familiar, nothing special. They thought they knew who he was and everything about him. They could not open up beyond the little boxes of familiarity they had in their heads. And because of this, as the story says in a sad tone, Jesus could do nothing in that place, except help a very few people. So much more could have happened! So much was missed! Note that Jesus' ability to do something, or God's ability to do something through Jesus, needed the openness—the belief—of the people. So much can happen, indeed, already IS HAPPENING, yet our lack of openness keeps it from happening and keeps us from seeing it.

Our spiritual work is to drop our judgments, our “knowledge”, the definitions we have created in our minds for what is and what is not true, or good, or of God. When the scales of what we have decided is familiar, or weak, or unworthy, whether in ourselves or in others, drop from our eyes, the eyes of faith are opened. Then we will see beauty, goodness, true strength and power everywhere. Then we will see in one another the presence, the speaking, the working of God. Then all things are possible.