

“The Weak/Strong, Strong/Weak Paradox”

2 Corinthians 12:1-10 – July 5, 2009

INTRO: Difficulties at Corinth developed because teachers had come into this early congregation, who claim they are better qualified to lead than their original teacher, Paul. “In the process, the leadership becomes the prize in a contest to prove who is better. Playing their game, Paul tries to justify his credentials as a leader. Yet, this proving oneself runs counter to what Paul really believes, which is centered not on the worthiness of people, but on the graciousness of God.” (L. William Countryman) And that’s where Paul finally settles in, towards the end of this passage.

I loved the movie *Up*, and can happily say I would recommend it to just about everyone—kids, youth, and adults. Probably the worst thing, is that it may make you cry—more than once—but that’s not a bad thing at all. The movie tells the story of the life of Carl Fredricksen a retired balloon salesman, who shared many wonderful married years with Ellie, his wife. They had a great life, weathered some ups and downs, and always had the dream of traveling to South America to see Paradise Falls. One day, knocking on the door of Carl’s very old house, is eight year old Russell, an overly optimist, somewhat irritating, Junior Wilderness Explorer (think Boy Scout). Russell wants to know if Mr. Fredricksen needs some help, because if Russell can help an aging person in some way, he will earn his next badge. Carl wants nothing to do with him and tries to shut the door in his face.

To be fair to Carl, he is dealing with a lot. His wife has died, they some of their dreams never came to fruition, including the hope of getting to Paradise Falls, he’s living in his old house that is marked for demolition because development is springing up all around him, and everyone tells him to just move to a retirement community. Most days he walks with his 4 legged cane. “He’s 78 years old, and the years have taken their toll on his lugubrious body and spirit, both of which seem solidly tethered to the ground. Even the two corners of his mouth point straight down. It’s as if he were sagging into the earth.” (Manohla Dargs)

To look at Carl, you may agree that he just needs to give up, and rest for the remainder of his days. He doesn’t seem like someone who has much energy and desire for adventure left in him. Yet, looks can be deceiving. Without giving away the whole plot, I’ll just say that Carl figures out a way to attach balloons to his house, and sail towards South America. Carl doesn’t know it, but Russell is riding along, and they become partners as they encounter snarling dogs, a nasty villain, strange animals, and have to daily contend with the baggage of Carl’s house. Neither Carl nor Russell look like they are up to this adventure, nor have the strength to complete it.

The apostle Paul may have been wondering if he was up to leading these people in Corinth. He had his own baggage, and what he called his thorns in the flesh, his limitations. We are not sure exactly what he was referring to, but maybe he had a physical ailment, bouts of depression, anxiety, or maybe his baggage happened to be the other leaders who were trying to undermine him. “Throughout 2 Corinthians, Paul has been up against a group of religious pretenders, sheep-stealers who’ve discredited Paul by slinging mud. They point to his ongoing hardships and persistent troubles as signs of deficient faith.” (Daniel Harrell)

“When Paul first became aware of his handicap, he prayed to God to remove it—it was humiliating and interfered with his work.” (Ernest Best) But Paul couldn’t get rid of it—and it probably bugged him every day of his life. He didn’t try to dismiss his weakness, nor did he hold onto the idea of self-sufficiency.

Rather than continuing to ask for release from the weakness, Paul owned it and came to believe that the power of Christ could lead and support him. He didn’t say that God had caused this in his life, but that God could work through him anyway. He found that when he knew he was weak and lacking in physical and spiritual strength, then the power of God could be at work, so that in effect, he became strong. “The point of Paul’s weakness could become the starting place for God’s power.” (James Reid)

“John Wesley is said to have ridden 60-70 miles/day and preached an average of 3 sermons a day. When he was 83 years old, he wrote in his diary: ‘I am a wonder to myself. I am never tired, either with preaching, writing or traveling.’ For Wesley, this was the work of an all-sufficient grace—not his own power, but God’s power working through his humanity.” (William Barclay)

A fellow’s truck slid off a road and ended up in a ditch. A farmhouse was nearby, so the motorist asked the owner if he had a tractor he could borrow to get his truck back on the road.

“Nope, but I got my mule, Blue,” said the farmer. “I doubt a mule is strong enough to pull my truck out,” “You don’t know Blue,” said the farmer. So, Blue was hitched to the truck, “Pull, Blue.” The truck didn’t move. And the farmer then called out, “Pull, Elmer!” The truck moved a little. Then the farmer yelled, “Pull, Biscuit,” and the truck was free. “Thank you so much,” said the truck owner. “But I have a question. You called your mule by three different names. How is that?” “Simple,” said the farmer. “Blue is blind. And if he thought he was the only one pulling, your truck would still be in the ditch!” As long as Blue didn’t think he was doing it all himself, he was able to do the job. *(Homiletics, 7/06)*

Blue needed help, he knew it. That’s not always the case with people. One Fourth of July in Monona, it was a very hot day and I had spent many hours dismantling a water bed. The water was finally down the shower drain, and I was about half way through the process of taking the bed apart. A knock came at my door, and it was a friend who was riding her bike around Lake Monona—a 13 mile ride, on a very hot day. She was over-heated and worn out, and I invited her in to recuperate and gave her something cool to drink. What she didn’t know was that I was worn out myself, wondering how I could ever carry the heavy headboard down the steps by myself. So, by the time she had cooled off, I turned around and asked her to help me carry the heaviest pieces to the garage.

Many of us operate in a very self-sufficient way, even when we deep down know, it would be better off to ask for help. “Ironically, weakness can extricate a person from the forces of our ego, to engage the power of another person, or the power of Christ in our lives.” *(Homily Service, 7/94)* Our very weaknesses are some of the ways we connect with each other and with God. God’s grace may just be found in those interactions.

“Paul believed that his weakness forced him to look not to himself, but to God and God’s power. Paul didn’t need to fear his failings, his weaknesses, because that’s just a part of being human, and when we can accept that, God’s grace can operate.” *(Ernest Best)*

We forget “one of the many paradoxes of the Christian faith: weakness equals power. In lifting others up, we lift ourselves. When we experience sorrow, we can discover joy. When we are last, we are first. When we die, we live.” *(Homiletics, 7/03)*

Paul said that whenever he was weak, he remembered that the greatest of powers belong to God, not to human beings. “God’s power doesn’t work in people who are full of themselves; it works in those who have emptied themselves, or in whom suffering has emptied them of all pretense of personal strength. Then only, can we plug into God’s (power and grace).” *(Homiletics, 7/03)*

Annie Lamott says that grace is “the help you receive when you have no bright ideas left, when you are empty and desperate and have discovered that your best thinking and most charming charm have failed you. Grace is the light or electricity or juice or breeze that takes you from an isolated place and puts you with others who are as startled and embarrassed and eventually grateful as you are to be there.” *(Traveling Mercies)*

Grace is what was operating for Paul. It is the strength God gives us to live with all our foibles, deficiencies and thorns in the flesh, and it functions precisely where there is weakness and where that weakness is acknowledged.

Think of the times when we have tried to teach a child or a beginner, a new technique or skill. “And we find that person resisting our instruction, thinking they already know it all. It’s impossible to help them, because they don’t recognize their need for help. But once they recognize they don’t know something—that they are deficient, we can share from our strength.” *(Ernest Best)*

Perhaps that’s the way it is with God and people. We think we know what we need to know, and go racing ahead, when all we need is to not be afraid of our weakness or not get bogged down in it. But acknowledge our weakness and let God surprise us with new-found strength.

--Sue Burwell