

# **“Our Weakness is God’s Strength” by M**



**July 8, 2018**

## **The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost**

As a long time member of Seekers Church, I have become accustomed to the lectionary reading cycle. I had familiarity with the lectionary cycle from my previous church experience, but not from my growing up. When the readings repeat every three years, there is comfort in the rhythm. As I am not the same person that I was three years ago and the world is not the same experience as it was three years ago, there is opportunity for new insights.

It was fun to see what Seekers was addressing on these three year cycles. In 2015 around this time in cycle, Muriel brought the word and focused more on the structures of home and a

group of Seekers were sharing about their experience in Guatemala. Six years ago, New Story Leadership shared their experience in building relationships between Palestinians and Israelis. Nine years ago, Marjory used these texts to speak about Seekers sense of being and really used the Mark 6 passage as the focal point. All of which was a relief to review as my focus is not on these.

Paul's follow up letter to the Corinthians is written in the context of trying to reconnect his version of direction versus what they have heard from some other itinerant missionaries. In that context, he is working to re-establish his credibility. In that context, he is choosing to boast.

Now, I do not believe that I have had an out of body experience – except maybe as a child when I was sick and I distinctly recall feeling like I was floating in my room, at ceiling level, and looking down on myself. I have had exhilarating experiences but they have definitely been “in body”. The thrill and glorious view and terrifying nature of taking a zip-line in the cloud rainforest of Monteverde, Costa Rica, was an “in body” experience. The fireworks of the local Takoma Park Independence Day celebration with the firework shells and ash or gunpowder landing on me was an “in body” thrilling experience. I do not choose to boast about these. Neither does Paul.

Paul certainly could choose to boast about his past credentials, yet he does not do that either. He was educated. He had been a part of the Jewish establishment by being a Pharisee. While being a missionary he may have earned his income by being a tentmaker or leather worker. I can relate to Paul in these credentials. I have a Master's degree. I was a senior analyst in the federal government. I currently work as a crafter.

But Paul does not use any of these credentials as his means of credibility with the Corinthians. Rather, the credentials he

claims to gain credibility with his audience is his weakness.

Building community, building connection comes from shared weaknesses, not credentials of strength.

For the past year and a bit, I believe I have some knowledge of this. On a weekly basis I hear the following words: "It is weakness, not strength, that binds us to each other and to a Higher Power and somehow gives us the ability to do what we cannot do alone." These words are part of a 12 step meeting that I attend. My guess is that there is a variant of these words in every 12 step program for whatever addiction one faces.

I do not know what Paul viewed as his particular weakness. There are some who believe he had poor physical vision (yes, something else that I share with Paul). And I do understand how Paul could be asking God to remove the weakness. And, I can understand the frustration that is part of relying on God's timing for an answer.

I do not claim my poor vision as a major weakness, thanks to science and medicine. I understand that I am not able to remove the weakness myself but have to rely on God's timing. I won't go as far as Paul in delighting in my problems. Boasting about my weaknesses can follow a trajectory of self conceit dressed up as "woe is me". Again, that isn't what God asked or told Paul, God told Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

I am powerless over my compulsive eating. I have to rely on God every day, every minute, to stop me from eating when I am not physically hungry or in need of food for energy. I would eat to hide from my self esteem issues. I would eat to bury my anger and disappointment. I would eat to console me in my depression. I ate to reward myself for tasks completed. You name it. I used food as an outlet for all of it.

A little over a year ago, I chose to admit my weakness and

follow a 12 step path of turning over my food addiction to God and trust that God cares about my life, my well being enough to intervene. After doing the daily footwork of admitting my weakness and turning that over to God, I have lost weight. I stumble at times and return back to overeating. But, I start again. My focus is not on the scale, it is on the daily choices in my life. God's grace is enough. God's grace is there for the claiming on a daily basis. God cares about my daily life and that care shows up as an external source of strength to make better choices about my behavior overall and my relationship to food. Like Paul, I need to hear God tell me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

My compulsive behavior around food is just one aspect of my character weaknesses that I have to turn over to God in each moment. Each day is filled with odd choices. After a Carroll Café concert, a number of us go to a nearby restaurant afterwards for a late dinner and time to connect. I had a waiter spill a glass of water on me. As I sat in my chair and now I was wet, it was an immediate choice on whether to rant or to be calm and take the mishap in stride. I chose to stay calm and to focus on fixing the problem. My clothes will dry. Life will go on. The restaurant then offered to give me a free dessert as an apology. Now, as a compulsive overeater, the offer of a dessert was NOT good news, but I understood and could value their apology. It did not make sense to rant again, the issue of overeating is my problem, not theirs. I accepted the dessert and gave it to my son (except for one bite). Accepting and acknowledging all of our weaknesses, mine and the waiter's, gave God an opportunity for building community in a small way. The incident could be filled with grace and acceptance and forgiveness.

The weekly meeting of my 12 step addiction is a place where community is built. The "liturgy" of the meeting encourages a shared commitment, a sharing of our weakness, and a shared

learning and support. I'll admit that sometimes that meeting has more about church and God in it than the Seekers worship service. I am troubled by this. I do not know if this is a reflection on the community or on me and my engagement with Seekers here on Sunday mornings. I do know that my mission group provides a similar connection in shared commitment, shared weakness, shared learning and support as my 12 step program.

It is easy to think of weaknesses as just a personal matter. Paul, as the consummate church builder, thought it was important to share that his weakness was used by God to show grace. This understanding of weakness seems important for the church community. Naming his weakness and allowing God's grace is important for the faith community. It is important for my 12 Step group meeting and for Sunday's here at Seekers. I am not saying that I never find this level of connection on Sunday morning, but I find it infrequently.

It may be that as an introvert with a busy life, I need a bit more time to get into worship than what the liturgist typically does. I know that I can really connect with the prayers, but only if I have had enough time of silence leading in to it.

For those of you not familiar with the 12 steps, I am going to spend a little time on a few of the steps. For all, I am particularly drawing out the ways that the structure of liturgy in our current worship experience fit those steps or don't. When I look at the first 7 steps of the 12 steps, they seem pretty applicable to our Sunday worship experience, or could be.

1. We admitted we were powerless over our addictions and compulsive behaviors, that our lives had become unmanageable.

I believe the confessional time in prayer is supposed to draw

this out from me. I often do not just lead off with "God I am a compulsive overeater" but maybe I should. After I get that bit of "weakness" named, God generally has a habit of showing me the other problems that I have – anger, poor time management, lack of care for others, etc. But often I find that I can't find the door to naming aloud a confession in the way that the corporate prayer is structured or by the time I do find the words, the prayer has already moved on.

2. We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

Certainly, the assurance in the prayer and my regular presence here attest that I believe there is a power greater than me that can restore my sanity. I confess that I do not always look at your faces and see that you are here for the exact same reason – the need for power greater than ourselves to restore us to sanity, to give us courage and hope, to bring grace to our brokenness, our weakness.

3. We made a decision to turn our wills and our lives over to the care of God.

It is really easy for me to get too comfortable with myself and not do this step. I certainly have tried "on my own" to get by and failed horribly. I don't know that I hear a lot about "turning over" in our worship. That may be simply a fault of my hearing not the fault of what is taking place.

4. We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

I do not think that we give ourselves enough time in the Sunday morning worship to do this step. I am not sure we need to do it here. The inventory more often happens within the mission group and with your spiritual guide in the mission group. The sermons do give us a chance to start, to add new items to our inventory, to reflect and remove some. A moral inventory is both identifying the good qualities as well as

those I do not possess. I will blame my past for the fact that I do not easily think about my good qualities. But sermons can also be ways to hear that Good News.

5. We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

I really value in Seekers that the prayer time expects us / me to name my wrongs, not to have the preacher/liturgist do it all on my behalf. The more specific the statement, the easier it is for me to find my connection with the named wrong. It allows me to pray with / support the prayers of others. Your specific prayers help me see the specific wrongs that I have committed.

6. We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

There is an internal shift that happens with this step. Getting the willingness to change, asking God for the willingness to change are part of the corporate prayer. It is the part where we can hear that there is forgiveness/healing.

7. We humbly asked Him to remove all our shortcomings.

This humility is important. Paul asked God to remove the weakness. And God did not remove it, but changed it. The weakness was transformed. For transformation, it is important to allow God to give grace, to be grace, in my life.

I am not going to cover the other 5 steps here today. If this has been useful reflection for you, you can certainly find the other five steps in printed literature or on line.

Looking at the Gospel of Mark, even Jesus experienced weaknesses and was able to use that to extend the network of care and love. The Gospel story includes this.

In Mark 6, we find that Jesus has returned to his hometown and experiences hometown disconnect. Mark relays that the town,

the community, had a hard time recognizing and including Jesus. He has some ideas and things that he has done outside of the community that do not seem consistent with their understanding of him.

I know a bit about hometown disconnect. I've spent more time in my hometown this year than most years. My son and I generally spend August out there, and we did last year. I also got on a plane on short notice in October as my father was hospitalized and my mom asked for me to be there. I was there, and my son was there too, when my father died. Then again I was out there at Christmas time with my spouse and son and I did another trip in the winter.

I know that each time I am back, I go through disconnect. I don't remember high school classmates' names. I don't remember church members from my childhood. But they remember me. And they have their sets of expectations and values that they apply to their interactions with me. They have their sense of what is "worth" and how I am supposed to belong. I often do not assert my own truth there. Sometimes that is because I fear the alienation that may result. At other times it is that I do not perceive the relationship to be worth the effort.

I also wonder at times if what I have experienced, or lack experiencing, in Seekers is more about my investment, my perceived sense of your "worth" than anything else.

Mark says that Jesus could not perform the miracles that he had in other places. "He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them."

As pastor Neil Chappell shared, if this was a bad day for Jesus, I just wish that I could have more bad days like that. (<https://aweirdthing.wordpress.com/2012/07/02/concrete-footprints/> )

I think Mark had a bigger hang up with the community than is warranted. After all, prior to this, Jesus had mostly been



healing sick people and casting out demons. There was the unusual experience of raising a young girl from death and calming the sea, but Jesus' was still able to do the same work, maybe not as many or as visually shattering as the demons going into the herd of pigs.

More importantly though, Jesus' inability to do the work directly becomes an opportunity to expand the role of his disciples and have them empowered to heal, to share God's love, to work miracles.

Jesus, in sending out his disciples, had them go out in a position of weakness – no extra baggage, no extra provisions, just what is needed for the day and for the relationship. This dependency, this weakness, allows the disciples to be God's love and caring in the world. They healed the sick and cast out demons. They were God's good day.

Were the disciples scared to go out without more than daily provisions? Mark does not tell us. I can only assume so. Being sent from a position of weakness and dependence is an opportunity to reflect on our world view and maybe change it. A discussion about scarcity versus abundance as a world view is a whole other conversation and series of sermons that I leave for others to do.

Can we, like the disciples, learn to live from our weaknesses, not our egos? Can we learn to boast in our failures? Can we recognize and live in such a way that we see, "It is weakness, not strength, that binds us to each other and to a Higher Power and somehow gives us the ability to do what we cannot do alone"? Can we, in our weakness, love and heal the world?