

"Surrender to Win" by John Morris

John Morris

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Surrendering to Win

The subject of this sermon is weakness.

In the reading from 2 Corinthians this morning, we heard St. Paul say, "When I am weak, then I am strong." What a characteristically Christian statement that is! The inversion of worldly "truths," the simple, direct assertion of paradox – such language goes back to Jesus, of course. How many times do we hear him say similar things? "He who would gain his life must lose it"; "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"; "The last shall be first, and the first shall be last" ... This way of talking seems to be at the heart of the Christian message.

However, to those who are not Christians, the idea of strength in weakness, in particular, may appear empty, meaningless – or worse, a calculated untruth designed to assuage hurt feelings and political powerlessness. One of the greatest and most persuasive enemies of Christianity, Friedrich Nietzsche, famously argued this. In *The Genealogy of Morals*, he called Christianity a "slave morality"; it begins, he said, by "rancor turning creative and giving birth to values – the rancor of beings who, deprived of the direct outlet of action,

compensate by an imaginary vengeance.” Let me quote Nietzsche a bit further, because I think it’s important to understand just how ridiculous the Christian paradox of strength in weakness can be to unbelievers.

Nietzsche imagines the creators of this slave morality (among whom he included Jews as well as Christians) saying to themselves, “‘Let us be unlike those evil ones. Let us be good. And the good shall be he who does not do violence, does not attack or retaliate, who leaves vengeance to God, who ... shuns all that is evil, and altogether asks very little of life – like us, the patient, the humble, the just ones.’” Now this really isn’t such a bad statement of the Christian attitude, if slightly smug. But then Nietzsche goes on to say, “Read in cold blood, this means nothing more than ‘We weak ones are, in fact, weak. It is a good thing that we do nothing; we wouldn’t be strong enough.’” This “basic prudence,” as Nietzsche calls it, has “tricked itself out in the garb of quiet, virtuous resignation ... as though the weakness of the weak, which is after all his essence, his natural way of being, ... were a spontaneous act, a meritorious deed. ... The inoffensiveness of the weak, his cowardice ... are being given honorific titles such as patience; to be unable to avenge oneself is called to be **unwilling** to avenge oneself – even forgiveness (‘for they know not what **they** do – we alone know what **they** do’)... .And they tell me that not only are they better than the mighty of this earth, whose spittle they must lick, ... but they are even better off, or at least they will be better off someday.”

In short, Nietzsche is declaring that Christianity is one big case of sour grapes. We are weak? Then we will celebrate weakness as a virtue. We are denied power? Then we will make a virtue of that as well, and say we never wanted it anyway. Our

enemies murder and imprison us? Let's call it martyrdom, and claim a reward in heaven.

Well. I hope you can appreciate how cogent this attack is. Nietzsche was neither the first nor the last to make it; it is implicit whenever someone claims that winning is everything, that life is the survival of the fittest, that it's the nature of humans to fight until the strongest alone is left standing.

How can we Christians refute this celebration of strength? Only, I think, by bearing witness, by speaking forthrightly about our own experiences, just as Paul does. Nietzsche and the apostles of power are claiming that there's simply no such thing as a "strength" that arises from weakness. But if our lives have shown us otherwise, we have to say so.

I myself have always been a weak person. I am by nature a slacker, a libertine and, I imagine – though I've never really been put to the test – a coward. When I was a boy, I remember playing war games with the other neighborhood kids. Prisoners could be tortured to learn the disposition of the enemy's forces. Permissible techniques were mild, of course – pinching below the waist, as I recall, was a violation of our Geneva Conventions. Nonetheless, I was always the first to break. I told all. I seemed to have no capacity for standing tall, for standing up for others, for hurling a defiant "No!" in the face of my tormentors. Had we played Romans and Christians, I would have made a terrible martyr, denying Jesus as fast as I could get the words out. More probably, I would have become a career Roman.

I had no more resistance to pleasure than to pain. I'd eat all my candy at one go, then whine for more. Temptation beckoned; I gave in. You might say I lived in the moment, for I was chronically unable to understand that an impulsive action would have consequences, that I might really be better off if I saved my allowance to buy something cool, rather than fritter it away, day by day, on those plastic troll dolls that, for some reason, were all the rage in my social set.

When, at 17, I discovered mood-altering drugs, especially alcohol, I felt to the manor born. Both varieties of weakness – the inability to endure pain, the unwillingness to forgo pleasure – come together in the most natural manner in a young alcoholic. It astonishes me, looking back from this vantage point, that I was able to live as a drunk for 10 years. (It's even more astonishing, of course, that some unlucky people can do it all their lives.) But by the end of those years, my life was in shambles and for the first time I was experiencing a weakness **as** weakness – I hadn't read Saint Paul but his florid language about messengers of Satan would not have seemed an exaggeration to me.

Now we all know that alcoholism is a disease, not a weakness. In most cases it's genetically based – certainly it was in my case, with both parents and a few uncles and aunts all full-blown drunks. But every alcoholic also knows that, in the grip of the disease, it **feels** like a weakness, especially when you try to stop, or even to drink like a normal person. The wretched failure, day after day, the maddening inability to do that simple thing, when every part of you knows you must – that's about as weak as one can get.

My recovery from alcoholism and drug addiction was essentially

unremarkable, since the method is now a part of American lore and has been used by millions. I had the great luck of meeting a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, I began to attend meetings, I tried to follow the advice of the sober members, and one day I found that I no longer wanted to drink. Everyone now also knows what the 12 Steps are – in fact, given their ubiquity in contemporary culture, you’ve probably heard a great deal more about them than you care to. But I do want to focus on the first step, because it is my witness, my answer to Nietzsche, my undeniable experience of the truth of Paul’s words.

The first step says, “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable.” Well, there it is – powerless. Not just weak – powerless. And the idea is that, by making this admission, we “surrender to win” (to use another A.A. phrase that’s relevant to my subject today) and, somehow, we gain a new power that is **not the same as personal will, or self-control, or even courage**, but that allows us to stay sober one day at a time.

There is a mystery here, as there is in any genuine spiritual change. I won’t pretend to explain it to you, as I can’t explain it to myself, entirely. It’s no coincidence that the rest of the 12 Steps focus pretty intently on the idea of a “power greater than myself” and “God as I understood him” and the necessity of prayer and meditation to maintain sanity in sobriety. Clearly, whatever this new strength is, the drunks who started A.A. believed it came from God. So do I. But the only real point I need to make, the only witness I need to bear, is that **it exists**. It is not a fiction, not a lie told by the weak and powerless. It is perhaps the realest thing I’ve ever experienced. It is also the strangest. I was weak. I said so, declared it in a room full of coffee-chugging, cigarette-huffing suburbanites in the

basement of a Methodist church in Rockville, Maryland – and suddenly I found a new strength that was not my own. It was not coming from me. For, as I've tried to make clear, I am not that kind of person. Left to myself, I am indeed powerless over alcohol, and just about everything else.

One other aspect of recovery may also help illuminate the mystery. As I've said, we A.A. folks mostly believe that the transformation of our powerlessness happens through God's grace – that, in Paul's words, God's grace is really sufficient. But absolutely none of us believe that God shows up in person at A.A. meetings and starts waving a magic wand. Nope, no burning bushes, no doves descending – look around that church basement and all you'll see is fellow drunks. So we tend to think that there's something special and important about the **community** of alcoholics trying to stay sober. Together, we somehow generate that strength in weakness, doing for each other what we could not do for ourselves. A.A., very sensibly, is not allied with any religion, so no one ever refers to this community as part of the Body of Christ – yet it is, and I know everyone here today could tell their own stories of what a community of believers can accomplish without once resorting to the world's version of power. (And by the way, Nietzsche made it clear that power was strictly an individual matter; no Übermensch would ever expect the herd of lesser humans to give him a hand with anything – no more, of course, than he would help them.)

Getting sober wasn't my last experience of strength in weakness – in fact, my decision, five years later, to try to follow Christ was based in a similar moment of horrible failure – but fortunately for you I don't have time to tell that story. I want to conclude with a question about politics that seems to arise from what I said a moment ago about

community. It will not be the most joyful note to end on, but it seems honest, at any rate.

What I've just described, and what I hope each of us in this room can bear witness to, is a transforming spiritual experience in which **personal** weakness is turned into a new kind of strength. But what about **social** weakness, the "weakness," if you will, of the Body of Christ as a whole and of Christians as a whole? Have we succeeded in finding a new strength, born out of our "slave morality," our refusal to answer wrong with wrong, violence with violence? Or are we in some sense kidding ourselves along, hoping against hope and despite the evidence? The Kingdom of Heaven isn't much nearer at hand than it was when Nietzsche derided us for believing in it. In fact, if he could see what the 20th century brought humankind, he would surely feel confirmed in his conviction that the will to power is all there is.

I'm not going to answer this question. Locally – writ small, as it were – we all know of amazing and precious moments of Christianity triumphant, of the Body of Christ making powerful changes in the Body Politic, just by refusing, by saying "No!" and by bearing witness to the way of Jesus. I would never ignore or belittle the victories of Martin Luther King, of Dorothea Day, of Bishop Romero, and of the thousands of Christian groups throughout the world who do, every day, change that world.

How do these victories stack up against Dachau, Hiroshima, Cambodia, Siberia, Burma, and Darfur? I can only ask the question. My hunch is that we are still living the answer. In time, we or our descendants are going to know whether the Body of Christ changed the world, whether this risible strength-in-weakness stuff can really mean something to six and half

billion people, not just a few drunks and Seekers. We shall see. We have our instructions: "Take nothing for the journey except a staff – no bread, no bag, and no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra tunic. Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave, as a testimony against them." The disciples, we are told, drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them. That happened to me. Let's get together and make it happen for everyone.