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2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Strengths and Weaknesses

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2 Corinthians 12:2-10 New Revised Standard Version

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows— was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

 This past Thursday I was taking Everett to taekwondo. I was supposed to pick up one of his friends and take him to taekwondo as well. But, as I drove out of the driveway, my mom called. And she was asking me questions about summer and summer camps, and I kept driving and talking to my mom. As we pulled into taekwondo, Everett asked me where his friend was. I gasped, I had completely forgotten to pick him up! I had been talking and gotten distracted. It is a weakness of mine, to do too many things at one time and not stay focused on what I am supposed to be doing. Sometimes I feel like I am like the dog in the movie UP that is constantly distracted with squirrels. Do you ever feel distracted? Unfocused? If this is not your weakness, then what is?

For the next few weeks we are looking at the question, how do you love yourself? Last week we talked about loving yourself by seeing yourself as God sees you. God knows us fully and completely. There is no part of us that is hidden from God. God is always with us whether we acknowledge God’s presence or not.

We talked about seeing ourselves as God sees us, and loving ourselves as God loves us. Because if we can open ourselves up to God’s love, we will experience a peace that will transform not only how we see ourselves, but how we see the world around us. God knows us, God made us, and God loves us, just the way we are.

This week we talk about our strengths and our weaknesses. For the Apostle Paul in our scripture his weakness was the thorn in his flesh. The scripture doesn’t ever tell us what that thorn in Paul’s flesh is. Paul calls it a “messenger of Satan” that had a purpose of “torment.” We don’t know if it was a physical, spiritual, or emotional affliction or something else entirely. He could have been referring to temptation, migraines, a neurological disorder, a speech disability, or it could have been another person who was a thorn in his flesh. We don’t know what it was, but we do know that it was a source of real pain in the Apostle Paul’s life.

Paul felt like the thorn kept him from becoming conceited. The thorn in his flesh kept him humble. No one likes to live in pain. Paul says three times he asked God to remove the source of pain from him and he heard God say to him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” Paul says, “Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

We all have weaknesses, and there is no shame in weakness. So often we would like to wish away our weakness, but if we would we would also unintentionally wash away our strengths. It is because of the empowerment of the Holy Spirit that our weaknesses are our strengths and our strengths are our weaknesses.

We were created to be dependent. If we are dependent we have to share our weakness with someone. We can share our weakness with God. Today is Pentecost, a day when we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit in us. Pentecost is God taking on flesh in us. The Holy Spirit reminds us each and every day that we can depend on God, that with the power of the Holy Spirit we can endure anything because God is with us. With the Holy Spirit we are unafraid and we are empowered. We are filled with the fruits of the Holy Spirit that Paul talks about in Galatians, with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Is anyone here a list maker? I would encourage all of us to create a list of our own strengths and weaknesses today. I sat down and did this and realized that my weakness list was much longer than my strength list. It is so much easier to think of our weaknesses then it is to think of our strengths. Have you ever noticed when someone compliments you on a strength, it is something a shock? It is like you never realized that you were good at that.

I love to listen to podcasts while I am in the car or walking. Yesterday I started listening to a podcast that had been recommended to me, Dear Sugar with Cheryl Strayed and Steve Almond. It is an advice show. I listened to an episode where they had gotten a letter from someone who was addicted to painkillers. The individual didn’t want anyone to know, but they knew they needed help. They wondered if anyone would love them if they knew their secret. I think that is the question that we all wonder. Is it okay for me to be me? We all feel like outsiders, we all feel like we won’t be loved. We have to stand up and face our demons and our ghosts. And the Holy Spirit gives us the power to do that. And we have to celebrate our glories and our joys. And the Holy Spirit is with us when we do.

In the Dear Sugar podcast they talked about transformation. They talked about the Disney movie Beauty and the Beast. Have you ever seen that movie? In that movie, in one moment the beast is the beast and the next moment the beast becomes beautiful. We think that is how it works with us too. We seem to think that our lives are like Hollywood movies. We see a weakness in ourselves and we decide to do something about it, we are going to change it. So, we think, okay, today I am one thing, but now I have had a realization, I have had an epiphany and now I will become something different. But that isn’t realistic. That isn’t how actual transformation works.[[1]](#footnote-1)

So how does actual transformation work? What does it look like? How do we actually change our lives? Transformation is being both the beast and beautiful for quite a while. We might never get rid of our beastly urges, of our desire to drink, of our craving for prescription pills, of our desire to be liked. We want to be one thing only, either the ugly duckling or the swan. But we are beasts and we are beautiful at the same time.[[2]](#footnote-2)

God’s grace is sufficient for us, for power is made perfect in weakness. For the power of Christ dwells in us, thanks be to God for the Holy Spirit. May we be content with our weaknesses, with insults, with hardships, with persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for when we are weak, then we are strong.

1. This paragraph is taken from Dear Sugar Radio Episode: I’m Addicted to Painkillers. http://www.wbur.org/2015/01/09/dear-sugar-addicted-to-painkillers [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This paragraph is taken from Dear Sugar Radio Episode: I’m Addicted to Painkillers. http://www.wbur.org/2015/01/09/dear-sugar-addicted-to-painkillers [↑](#footnote-ref-2)