



## **Sermons from Northwood United Church**

**Holy Weakness**

**Mark 6:1-13, 2 Corinthians 12:2-10**

**Will Sparks**

**July 5, 2015**

May the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives, be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I was at an orientation meeting yesterday for those of us who were elected to attend the General Council meeting of the United Church of Canada this summer. Every three years, the national church meets and takes care of important, denomination-shaping issues. We talked about all the key issues facing the church not the least of which is the comprehensive review of the organizational structure of the church and the 11 million (yes, I didn't misplace a zero) dollars that we need to trim from the national budget. There are other issues facing the church, like the church's support of missing and murdered women in Canada...

All this, of course, puts me in mind of all the beautiful, struggling, joyous communities all across this country, United Churches like our's and those around us, who are trying to faithfully live out the gospel in their community, and it puts me in mind of all the new ministers, like those ordained a month ago in Whistler, who will be starting this week and perhaps will be speaking for the first time to their congregations in newly minted pastoral relationships. It is a beautiful thing we try to do in the church, and these ministers have dedicated their lives to the call of gospel love, healing and grace. It is truly beautiful.

And you heard the scriptures as well as I did. Thorn in the flesh, rejection and shake the dust off your sandals. Can you imagine these as inaugural readings for a new minister?

But these readings give not only trouble but a gift as well, one of the most insightful set of sentences in the entire works of Paul. Paul writes to the fractious people of Corinth who have been questioning what gives him the right to say anything about anything. And he responds, "God 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 weakness, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore, I am content with my weakness.... For whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Therein lies one of the deepest paradoxes of life and of the gospel of Christ. In weakness is true strength. In the cross is the real power. In emptiness is God's all-sufficiency. In vulnerability is true security.

Last week we celebrated the baptism of Diego Vivanco, handsome little guy who wasn't quite sure whether to reach for mom or look around and wave at the adoring crowd. What an indescribable miracle is a new born life. Others like Sarah and Addison who were baptized only two weeks previously are smaller, even weaker, and more vulnerable, but if any one of those little people start gazing intently at your eyes, you too will know the disarming miracle of life in your hands. There is huge divine power and huge vulnerability, ushering a new life into the world. Such vulnerability and such divine power. I can't remember who said it but I heard the quote, "having a child is like removing your heart from your body and having it walk around in the world outside of yourself." Not having a child when your heart yearns for one is just as vulnerable.

In every case, you want to do well. You want to do the right thing. You don't want your child to have to live with the same kinds of dysfunctional garbage you grew up with. And God's twisted humour leads you to either duplicate with dizzying accuracy, the very dysfunction you

are trying to avoid, or to successfully create a whole new batch of dysfunctional garbage your parents could never have created in their most clever and ingenious moments.

Truth is, we want to do well, we want to be able parents. That is a beautiful desire, to seize this momentous beginning and make something of it. And yet, we are human. We will botch it up at time. We are weak, and Paul says, that weakness holds a powerful mystery. Some have mistakenly thought that power in weakness means that we must be ok with mediocrity, because driving and striving for better and stronger and more powerful is trying to be more than we ought to be. I don't buy that view because I believe God also wants us to try, to strive with our whole hearts and lay our lives down. We trip and stumble, however, when, in our striving, we begin to believe we are in charge, that we are the masters of our own destiny, that we have created our children. We forget our humanity.

Bob Smith, former moderator and mentor of mine once said, the opposite of a small truth is a small falsehood. The opposite of a great truth though is another great truth. And today we have been offered a great truth- "power is made perfect in weakness." We are called to exercise power to make good and Godly things happen. And at the same time, we are called to recognize that we came into this world naked and vulnerable, utterly dependent on God, and we will leave the world the same way, and anything that is worthwhile, worth boasting about that happens during our lives will have grown out of that weak place where our deepest being resides in God.

Accepting weakness is not our immediate inclination as human beings. Microsoft does not reward weakness. Much the opposite. Our world rewards strength, and if you are weak, well either put on your big boy undies and man up, or hide your weakness. Paul had a weakness- what he called his thorn in the flesh. Nobody knows just what that was, but for the majority of his life, he hid it with the power of intimidation. But as the story goes, on the road to Damascus, he was brought to his knees, and he realized how weak, how vulnerable, and how human he was. He prayed to be released from whatever his weakness was, but it was in that weakness that he discovered his deepest source of power. He never would have trusted in God and discovered weakness as his deepest source of power had he been released from it. Weakness became the doorway to faith and power.

As uncomfortable as I am with my own weakness, I believe it is a gift. Without my weakness, I would always rely on myself. Because of it, I learn to rely on God. Without my weakness I would be living as if God was not alive. Because of it, I am aware that I am utterly in the hands of God. Without my weakness, I am under the illusion of the self-made man. With it, and through it, God does God's most beautiful, elegant, masterful creative work. When we realize that we cannot fix the human condition, God moves us to a deeper sense of our beautiful humanity- the purest gold of living. Maybe that is a good place from which to start out in ministry. Amen.