

Weak  
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha  
July 31, 2016

**Psalm 107:1-9, 43**

- <sup>1</sup> O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;  
for his steadfast love endures for ever.
- <sup>2</sup> Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,  
those he redeemed from trouble
- <sup>3</sup> and gathered in from the lands,  
from the east and from the west,  
from the north and from the south.
- <sup>4</sup> Some wandered in desert wastes,  
finding no way to an inhabited town;
- <sup>5</sup> hungry and thirsty,  
their soul fainted within them.
- <sup>6</sup> Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,  
and he delivered them from their distress;
- <sup>7</sup> he led them by a straight way,  
until they reached an inhabited town.
- <sup>8</sup> Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,  
for his wonderful works to humankind.
- <sup>9</sup> For he satisfies the thirsty,  
and the hungry he fills with good things.
- <sup>43</sup> Let those who are wise give heed to these things,  
and consider the steadfast love of the LORD.

In *Rising Strong* Brené Brown names the general fear of being vulnerable by pointing out that we often see vulnerability as weakness.<sup>1</sup> In struggling with her own avoidance of vulnerability at all costs, she described the root of her fear like this: “Helping was the most value I brought to a relationship. If I couldn’t help or, God forbid, if I had to ask for help, what value did I bring?”<sup>2</sup> Oh my goodness, yes. **I** am supposed to help, not **be** helped.

In December of 2007 I experienced a blood clot in my right leg which put me in the hospital for a few days and set me to using a cane for a while. I had just finished working at

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<sup>1</sup> Brené Brown, PhD., LMSW, *Rising Strong* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

my home church and began my first post-seminary work the same August so I was still closely connected to the youth group there. That youth group has a tradition of going caroling on the last Sunday they meet in December. The pastor determines the list of those receiving visits and they are always, **always**, older adults, almost all of whom are at home and cannot make it to church. When **my** doorbell rang that December, my first thought was an indignant one – **I** am not supposed to be getting a visit. **I** was the one who drove kids around just last year. I admit my response was regrettably not a gracious one of gratitude for being thought of.

It is important to come face-to-face with our own understandings of weakness, and the value, or lack of value, we put on it, before we look at what Joan S. Gray has to say. “If I couldn’t help or, God forbid, if I had to ask for help, what value did I bring?” If we are associating our own value with being able to help, then very certainly we will devalue those who cannot help, who need help, and, often, unconsciously. How often have you heard the term “the needy” used without some implication of the “less than” who must receive from those with more, those people who can offer the help that the needy cannot provide for themselves? I cannot think of a time when I have heard this in any other way.

It is this valuing of helpfulness, of invulnerability, which leads us to want to never need to ask for help. And if we don’t want to ask for help, if we don’t want to be in need, if we don’t want to be seen as weak, then God cannot have much worth to us. God is so much more powerful than we are and yet, if we are so self-sufficient as to not need anyone, we certainly don’t need God. Alas, we reject what God values if this is how we live.

God seeks to provide, but we refuse. God seeks to lift up, but we claim we can do it on our own. God seeks to help, but we proclaim we can do it ourselves. The psalms have little meaning when we see ourselves like this. Today’s psalm praises God for redeeming people from trouble. Joan S. Gray writes: “Three biblical principles are especially important to understanding and dealing with difficult situations, and they can help you grow ... in the midst of ... struggles ... : 1) God can bring good out of any situation; 2) God uses our

weaknesses; and 3) God leads, we follow.”<sup>3</sup> As believers, we **need** to let God be the strongest one.

Our faith is founded on God bringing good out of a terrible situation – the resurrection is rooted in this. The gospels tell us over and over again how Jesus helped those who acknowledged their own weakness and sought his power for help. Moses and David lead the way as people whose weaknesses were used by God. The exodus story is about an entire people who needed God’s strength to save them, and they followed God through Moses and as a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire. God **never** asked, “Why can’t you help yourselves?” Our psalm says, “they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.” God didn’t reply, “Seriously?!?”

Weakness is not undesirable to God – God who came to us as the weakest of all, a baby. Paul wrote to the Philippians that “Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus did not look down on the people whom he helped – he lifted them up so others wouldn’t look down on them, and he calls us to do the same.

As part of our mission trip we headed into downtown Indianapolis to Roberts Park United Methodist Church. I was thrilled to see something there that I had only seen on Facebook and in news articles without realizing it was in Indianapolis. On the property of, and at the commissioning of, Roberts Park UMC, was the “Homeless Jesus” statue. The plaque next to the statue centers around these words from Matthew 25: “I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!”<sup>5</sup> The church and the statue received national attention because many were offended by the portrayal of Jesus as homeless, and they felt it stripped Jesus of his divinity. I cannot help but see the statue through the lens of Philippians, as God’s choosing to become weak as we are, not negating divinity but taking on human frailty.

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<sup>3</sup> Joan S. Gray, *Spiritual Leadership for Church Officers: A Handbook* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2009); p. 115.

<sup>4</sup> Philippians 2:5-7.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 25:40; directly quoted from the plaque (Bible version unknown).

Last week I said that “disagreement” is not a dirty word. Neither is weakness. I struggle as Brené Brown did with separating my value from my ability to help, to fix things. I have a very difficult time welcoming my own weakness into my whole self, as if it had no place. But I know that every time I try to do something all by myself, I am changing the ways God can use me. Indeed, I am working against the way God seeks to use me. Growing up, the priests in my Catholic parish were seen as above humanity somehow, magically (the church would have suggested divinely) better than us who sat in the pews. It made them very difficult to connect with or feel understood by them. It is my very sincere hope that I have disabused you of such a perception of me, that I am somehow better, whether because of my seminary education or my sense of calling to the specific role of pastor.

And yet, I have from my earliest years in life, and in this call, still tried to overpower any weaknesses I have felt. Which kind of sends a mixed message, now doesn't it? Joan Gray, Brené Brown, and, most importantly, the Bible tell me that weakness is not shameful but simply part of the balance of being human. I have strengths which God uses. And I have weaknesses which God can use, does use, whether I give my permission or not. When I refuse, though, I keep God, and my need for God, at a distance. That's really not what I prefer. God seeks to provide, God seeks to lift up, God seeks to help. I'd really like that. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: Almighty God, help us let go of our negative judgment on those who need, especially ourselves, that in so doing, we come closer to you, we pray. Amen.