



## **Sermons from Northwood United Church**

**“Sent Forth in Weakness”  
2Corinthians 12:2-10, Mark 6:1-13  
Will Sparks                      July 8, 2012**

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

So, 20 years ago this week, I gave my first sermon as an ordained minister. It is hard to believe. When I look at pictures of that guy back then, I wonder how anyone could take him seriously. Oh, I didn't know it at the time, but I looked so young and I was so young. 28 years old, and freshly out of 4 years of theological study, placed among the longsuffering people of Arrow Lakes Pastoral Charge in the west Kootenays, the good people who had spent the entire history of the United Church of Canada in that neck of the woods, breaking in and training young, naïve, idealistic, green, myopic ministers like myself. I bless them every day for their patience. I was far smarter, then, than I am now, and I thank the good people of Arrow Lakes for sizing me rightly, for seeing the good, and smiling patiently, lovingly at the rest. You know what I mean because you have seen your fair share of ministers who come with goodness in their heart and mind but not always aware of their own weakness. And you are smart enough to know that weakness is an amazing teacher that will eventually be allowed to have her day at the front of the classroom of our lives.

Perhaps that is what the lectionary creators had in mind then they put today's readings together- to give the microphone to the great teacher, weakness, for a day, and see what might come of it. My goodness. You heard them as well as I did: thorn in the flesh, rejection and the kicking off of dust from the sandals. That is what ministry would look like for those early disciples as they started out. Don't expect it to be a power trip. Don't expect to be dealt an easy hand. And then one of the most insightful set of sentences in the entire works of Paul, penned to the fractious people of Corinth who have been questioning what gives him the right to say anything about anything. "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, I am strong."

I didn't know the truth of that when I started out, not in my mind, much less in my bones, God knows not in my soul. It wasn't my fault. It wasn't a failing of the seminary education- that was good. The thing is that no theological education could have ever taught me this truth, but only the great teacher weakness, experienced in the midst of life, will teach you this, the most wise of all lessons in the gospel and one of the deepest paradoxes of both life, and of the gospel of Christ. In weakness is true strength. In the cross is the real power. In emptiness is found God's all-sufficiency. In vulnerability is found true security.

A couple of weeks ago we said goodbye to one of our long-standing faithful, Janet Shea, in a most remarkable celebration of her life. For the first time in 20 years of ministry, people clapped along as we sang, at Janet's funeral. Janet who had grown up in the depression, on a farm in Saskatchewan. Moved to town, Moosejaw, at 16 when her mom got cancer. Moved out west with her husband and young family. She scratched out a life, a good life, in east Vancouver. Arthritis cut short her dancing days, but her singing days lasted to the very end of her life- singing in the choir while confined to her scooter up until the last couple of month. Talk about

someone with a thorn in the flesh, with a weakness. But weak would not have been a word I would ever have used in reference to her character.

Once again- the paradoxical genius of the Christian faith- the paradox that we celebrate whenever we gather around the font and baptize a child or adult. We gather and declare that, on the one hand, ultimately we are naked, weak and vulnerable in the face of life, like on the day we are born, and, on the other hand, deeply loved and blessed by life's maker, who is strength of all strength and power of all power.

Interesting. There is huge divine power that we are often most aware of at the end and the beginning of life's journey. Anyone who has brought a child into the world or been unable to knows the massive vulnerability and weakness connected with it, and so much divine power in that heart-breaking-open process- power in that longing, in that whole genetic line coming to bear on this one little one- so much at stake in this little life, such vulnerability. In weakness is God's all-sufficient power.

In my experience as a parent, you deeply want to do it well- do the right thing. But it is hard because life does not often give us clear choices: this is the right thing and this is the wrong thing. You don't want your child drag the same issues into their adult life that you dragged through life from your childhood- from your family of origin. But God, with her wicked sense of humour, has set life up such that we either duplicate the very dysfunction of our families with dizzying accuracy, or we successfully manage to create a whole new batch of issues that our parents could never have created in their most clever and ingenious moments.

But the truth is, deep in our hearts we want to do well with the life we are given, and with the gifts in life we are given- we want to make something good of it all. We want to be successful. We want the power to make something good. There is nothing wrong with this desire. Some have mistakenly thought that power in weakness means that we need to be ok with whatever, because driving for better and stronger and more powerful is trying to be more than you should be. I don't buy that. I believe God wants us to try with all we have and all we are, to strive with our whole hearts, to be successful- to put ourselves out there. We trip, we stumble, but we strive, and that's good. However, when, in our striving, we begin to believe that we are in charge, that we are masters of our own destiny, that we have created our children or our life, we then have lost track of the other end of the great paradox.

You see the opposite of a small truth is a small falsehood, but the opposite of a great truth is another great truth. And today we have been offered a great truth in a paradox- "power is made perfect in weakness." We are called to exercise power to make good, Godly things happen. We have that power, and that's a good thing. And at the same time we are called to recognize that we come into this world naked and vulnerable and utterly dependent on God, and we will leave the same way, and we are powerless to change that. Anything worthwhile- worth boasting about that we achieve in the intervening time between our naked coming and our naked going will have grown out of that weak and vulnerable place where our deepest being resides in God.

It is not our immediate inclination to accept what Paul has to say, to accept our weakness. The world does not reward weakness. Microsoft fires weakness. Our world rewards strength, and if you are weak, either power up or hide it. Paul had a weakness- what he called his thorn in the flesh. We don't know what it was and he prayed to be released from it. But it was in the weakness that he discovered his deepest source of power, a trust in God that he called faith. He never would have known faith had he been released from his weakness. This is true of you, and of me, and of Janet, and of the blessed child we hold in our arms.

As uncomfortable as we are with our own weakness, I believe that our weakness is a gift. Without it, we would always rely on our own power. Because of it, we must learn to rely on God. Without weakness we would live as if God was not alive. Because of it, we are aware that our life is utterly in the hands of God. Without our weakness and vulnerability we live under the

illusion of the self-made person. With it, and through it, we wake from that illusion and God does God's most beautiful, elegant, masterful, creative work. It is when we realize that we cannot fix the human condition that God moves us to a deeper sense of our beautiful humanity- the purest gold of our living. And if that is the only thing I have learned in 20 years of ministry, I am ok with that. . Amen.