

BY THE GRACE OF GOD

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

About three months ago, I was asked by the Duplin County Education Foundation Board of Directors to serve as one of three judges who would interview scholarship applicants. This is a task I have done for a number of years, which I find to be most enjoyable and quite a privilege.

We three judges divided up a list of twelve questions. Each applicant was asked the same questions. One of the questions I asked each applicant was, “What would your teachers say are your greatest strengths and biggest weaknesses as a student and as a human being?” One young man (who I happened to know) quickly identified the strengths he thought his teachers would name. Then he looked at the three of us and said, “Well, I don’t know if I want to talk about my weaknesses. After all, I’m trying to get a scholarship here!” That was good for a laugh. Then he did talk about certain weaknesses. After he left the room, the three of us agreed that he had been refreshingly honest with us. (He did end up receiving a scholarship.)

Whether he knew it or not, that high school senior named a major characteristic of our culture that doesn’t value anything that might be perceived as weakness. Many of us try hard to cover up our weaknesses, our vulnerabilities, and our struggles, even in the church — our society just doesn’t reward, or many times even tolerate, weakness.

It’s easy to buy into the idea that success in life comes only from strength. Maybe you work in an environment where it would be a mistake to let other people know your weaknesses. Such shortcomings might be reflected on your next job performance review. Maybe you struggle to maintain an image of control and outward strength, because you’re afraid to let anyone know how vulnerable you really are — or because you’re afraid to admit to yourself that you don’t have all of the answers or the strength and resources to do what needs to be done. Maybe you even struggle in your faith because you think it all depends on you and your best efforts. Maybe you wonder about the message you hear sometimes, that if you only have enough faith, you will be blessed with success.

That is the challenge facing the pastors in Zambia. When I was at the school in Lusaka in 2013, Dustin talked with me about the challenge of the “prosperity gospel” that was prevalent in the Zambian Christian culture. Here is what he and Sherri wrote in their latest update: “One of the biggest challenges is that [the young pastors] are under heavy pressure to preach, as the core message of the Christian faith, that Jesus Christ is like the charms and magic that the new African believers are leaving behind —

except more powerful. Christ is the best and fastest ticket to get what you want: health and success for you and your family. Christ is the sure path to blessings on earth, and the sure path for avoiding the curses that can come one's way in this life." The Ellingtons write, "This message is not entirely wrong, but our students spend two to four years sorting through it while at Justo Mwale, learning to nuance some aspects of it and reject other aspects outright. Nevertheless, when they go out to the Presbyterian and Reformed churches and they preach a message that sounds different from the prosperity line of thought, they feel that they put themselves and their families at risk. . . Many of our students and graduates say they are paid by their congregations only if they preach prosperity, or at least they are paid far less if they do not preach current blessings and prosperity coming (rather like magic) through the power of Jesus."¹

So, the lure of success and blessing and power can be very real, even in the proclamation of the gospel. The temptation for us Christians is to think that the success and blessing and power somehow depend on our own strengths or our own knowledge or our own special spiritual experiences with God.

The apostle Paul could have succumbed to that temptation when he was trying to defend his own ministry and apostleship to the Christians at Corinth. Paul defends himself against what he calls the "super-apostles" who are working among the Corinthian Christians in his absence. Apparently, the super-apostles at Corinth had much to boast about, such as visions, revelations, fantastic experiences, and notable spiritual gifts. In turn, they were accusing Paul of being weak.

The irony, of course, is that Paul could match these super-apostles and go them one better when it came to visions and revelations and experiences with the risen Lord. But Paul doesn't allow himself to boast about these things — he doesn't even tell us *what* he heard and saw in his experience in the third heaven and Paradise. Even though Paul sometimes has the reputation of being egotistical and boastful, the truth is, he won't allow himself to boast about any of his accomplishments. If he did, the spotlight would be on him and not on the Lord Jesus Christ, where it rightly belongs. So, Paul is content to talk about his weaknesses. He learned that through his weaknesses, the power of Christ dwelt in and shone through him.

Here's another vignette about our mission as Christians in this world. On May 11, 2010, J. Warren Smith preached a sermon at Duke Divinity School entitled "The weakness in virtue, the virtue in weakness." The occasion was the commissioning of Duke Theological Seminary students for their summer internships. He preached from these verses in 2 Corinthians 12 and told those ministers-in-training, ". . .the hallmark of a true apostle is found, not in his strength, but in his weakness. For what is the apostolic mission? For what work is the apostle sent into the world but to bear witness to the power of God, who raised Christ Jesus from the dead. The apostle does this by being the earthen vessel in whom God manifests his resurrecting power. The same is true for us who walk in the footsteps of the apostles. Our ministry is not about displaying our wisdom or eloquence or compassion or righteousness. Were that the case, people

would see nothing greater than cultivated natural talents. The aim of our ministry is always to point beyond ourselves to God, who is at work in us. One of Karl Barth's mantras was John the Baptist's declaration, 'I must decrease that he may increase.' Jesus commanded us, 'Let your light so shine before men [sic] that they may see *your* good works and glorify *your Father* in heaven.' Yet when we read Jesus' words alongside Paul's, we realize that the light of God's power is revealed in the weakness that always accompanies even our best good works, and God is glorified through us."²

"You are my strength when I am weak," we sang a few minutes ago, "you are the treasure that I seek; you are my all in all. When I fall down, you pick me up; when I am dry, you fill my cup; you are my all in all." We also sang, "I am weak, but thou art strong; Jesus, keep me from all wrong; I'll be satisfied as long as I walk, let me walk, close to thee." That's the message Paul is communicating to the Corinthian Christians and to us who would follow in Jesus' footsteps and be his disciples.

Whatever his weakness was — what Paul calls his "thorn in the flesh" — God chose not to deliver him from it. Instead, God told him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." We may not easily believe that, but Paul was convinced it was true — God's grace is sufficient. He learned it by experience — through his labors, imprisonments, floggings, lashings, beatings, stonings, shipwrecks, sleepless nights, hunger, thirst, cold, nakedness, and anxiety about the churches (2 Corinthians 11:23-28)

What does Paul say about all of these things? "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness." (2 Cor. 11:30) Paul isn't having a pity party. He's not bragging about being more humble than other Christians. Paul is not displaying a false humility or piety. Instead, Paul tells the Corinthians the same thing he told the Philippian Christians, ". . . I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:11-13)

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a **wretch** like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see." We will sing that beloved and familiar hymn to close our worship service this morning. Think about that opening verse of the hymn in light of the key verse of today's scripture lesson: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." If we have no concept of our need of God's grace, how can we ever appreciate how amazing it is? If it all depends on us and our best efforts and visions and revelations and strengths and experiences, we really have no need to live by the grace of God.

In 1998, Kathleen Norris published an interesting book called *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*. In a chapter called "Sinner, Wretch, and Reprobate," she comments, "The word 'wretch,' then, does not paint a picture of who we want to be. Or who we think we are. The word has become so unpopular in recent

years, in fact, that people began complaining about its appearance in the first verse of ‘Amazing Grace’ — ‘Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.’ Some hymnals have taken out the offending word, but the bowdlerization of the text that results is thoroughly wretched English, and also laughably bland, which, taken together, is not an inconsiderable accomplishment: ‘Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved someone like me.’ *Someone?* Anyone? Anyone home? . . . People want grace, it seems, and will admit to being ‘lost’ and ‘blind’ in John Newton’s fine old hymn. But don’t ask them to admit that it might take knowing oneself as a wretch to truly know grace for the wonder that it is.”³

The Lord says, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” Do we really believe that? Does our church life show that to our community? Are we willing to let go and admit our weaknesses and ask God to show his power through us? Can we surrender to God and truly know grace for the wonder that it is?

Quite frequently I receive flyers and mailings about seminars about how to “make your church a success” or how to “make your church thrive.” It’s so easy, however, to end up saying, “Look at what *we’ve* done!” But, as one blogger has written, “What makes a church thrive is to remember that we are the ‘church of Jesus Christ,’ which means that the presence and power of Christ is the secret of our success. What makes the church thrive is the confidence that ‘when I am weak, then I am strong.’”⁴

May we always have the confidence to know and show God’s power in our weakness.

Let us pray: God of grace, we are here as people who live only through your grace. We give you thanks for the healing we have received and the freedom from sin in Jesus Christ. Help us to be confident in the knowledge that we are forgiven and saved by your grace through faith. Help us to live as people of your grace. Amen.

NOTES

¹Mission Connections, June 2015, A Program of Presbyterian World Missions: Dustin and Sherri Ellington, Mission Co-workers Serving in Zambia.

²J. Warren Smith, “The weakness in virtue, the virtue in weakness,” posted on Monday, July 5, 2010 at www.faithandleadership.com.

³Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), p. 166.

⁴Alan Brehm, “The Secret of ‘Success,’” at “The Waking Dreamer” found at www.thewaking-dreamer.blogspot.com.