Sunday, November 12, 1978
STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS
II Corinthians 12:7-10

Is there anyone listening who does not have some kind of weakness, some limitation, some handicap? I suppose in each person there is at least one thing that we wish was not that way. And some of us may have more than one. Thus, one of the most perplexing problems which each one of us faces is that of acknowledging and handling our particular weakness.

Maybe we're subject to fits of temper, outbursts which we find difficult to control. Or perhaps we have periods of despondency which we don't like and yet which we feel powerless to do anything about. Some of us may have a weak heart, or failing eyesight, or flat feet, perhaps we think that we're too short or too tall. In each one of us there is probably something about us which we wish were different.

Or to put it another way, most of us have looked at another person and have thought to ourselves, I wish I was like that. I wish I had her talent, or his looks, or her \ strength. Or "I wish I could be that kind of mother or that kind of husband or that kind of wife."

And there are other kinds of weaknesses and handicaps. One person may "have been born a cripple or another had polio years ago before the vaccines and thus is handicapped. Or some other illness hits us later in life and we have our activity curtailed.

Or here is a young woman who in youth had all the natural ambitions of young womanhood for success, but who now recognizes that she will never arrive at her desired goal. She will never write the poetry or compose the music or preach the sermons or hold the business positions that she dreamed.

And then some people have been involved in serious accidents through no fault of their own and thus are handicapped.

Still others of us may experience some weakness or limitation in our personal relationships. Here is a life that wanted love so desperately and missed it; or here is a home where marriage might have been a thing of beauty but was a tragedy; or here is a family where a child was greeted as a blessing and became an inward agony: and here is a household where death has severed a tie that was the support and glory of the home.

Thus, among the things that are true of all of us is the fact that each one of us has some kind of weakness, some limitation, some handicap which he or she must face. And many times, life finds us powerless before facts that cannot be changed.

Yet such weakness, handicaps, limitations, are nothing new as far as human beings are concerned. The Bible speaks of such things over and over again.

As one example, recall our scripture reading for today. The Apostle Paul, like all the rest of us, had his weakness, his "thorn in the flesh" as he called it. I suspect that he had others besides this one, but this particular weakness gave him a great deal of trouble. Many and varied have been the guesses of New Testament scholars respecting Paul's affliction. Some think it may have been defective eyesight; others a recurrent form of malaria, and still others think it may have been epileptic seizures.

Now if Paul had been like some of us, we would know more about his “thorn in the flesh.” Think of writing all those letters and telling nobody the symptoms of his troubles! We know nothing, however, about Paul’s trouble except that behind the scenes, like all the rest of us, Paul had to face and deal with a weakness in himself; a weakness that he prayed to escape, but which he could not evade; a weakness that he had to settle down with and live for the rest of his life.

Paul tells us that on three separate occasions he prayed to God for deliverance from his weakness, but the thorn in the flesh remained.

I’m sure that some of us have also prayed fervently for God to remove our particular weakness or limitation. And we have been disappointed. We know from our own experience, as did Paul, that God does not automatically and unfailingly free human beings from every physical illness or weakness.

Yet through his religious faith, the Apostle Paul found a new source of strength because of his weakness!

According to Paul, God said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” The weakness or handicap remained, but it no longer mattered in the same way, it was submerged, it was swallowed up, it was transcended. More than that, it became a source and a reminder of God’s power. Finally, Paul could say with confidence, “For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, with insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

J.B. Phillips translates this passage this way: “Therefore I have cheerfully made up my mind to be proud of my weaknesses, because they mean a deeper experience of the power of Christ. I can even enjoy my weaknesses, suffering, privations, persecutions, and difficulties for Christ’s sake. For my very weakness makes me strong in him.”

Thus, Paul discovered that because of his weakness, he now found new strength which gave him victory, not only to accept the handicap that harassed him but over all the hardships and oppositions that met him. He learned a new style of life; his weakness became strength.

The same thing can happen to you and to me. It is here that the Gospel of Jesus Christ speaks directly to our need. We can find strength in weakness. In fact, Paul’s experience gives us the guidelines as to how this can happen.

1. Note first that Paul wrote that he had cheerfully made up his mind to be proud of his weakness. To put it another way, he took a positive stance and action toward his weakness and not a negative one. He stopped feeling sorry for himself. This is the first step in letting God turn our weakness into strength.

However, like many of us, before Paul came to this kind of decision, like most of us he felt sorry for himself. You know how it goes — we ask, “Why did this have to happen to me?” What have I done to deserve this weakness? Why can’t I be like other persons? What great things I could do if it were not for this weakness? “These are some of our instinctive reactions to our weaknesses and handicaps. But as Paul discovered, it’s not a very efficient or helpful way for dealing with weaknesses.

Paul discovered, as you and I can discover, that a person can rather say to himself or herself, “Do you suppose that you are the only one in the world with some kind of weakness? Few people get their first choice. Who is there who has had a chance to live out his or her life under the ideal conditions that he or she would’ve chosen?

Harry Emerson Fosdick tells the story of famous violinist who while giving a concert had the A string break in the middle of the composition. The violinist transposed the music and finished it on three strings. Fosdick went on to say, “That’s life, to helve your A string snap and have to finish on three strings.” Some of the finest accomplishments in human life have come about that way. While it would’ve been a thrill to have heard the violinist in a normal concert, it would’ve been more thrilling to have heard him at that concert when he had to finish on three strings.

As soon as a person begins to take a different attitude toward his or her weaknesses, the same weaknesses can begin to present themselves as opportunities, always challenging, sometimes fascinating. It is a good cook who after the dinner has been burned, knows how to make a fine meal out of the leftovers, and a good cook will be challenged to try.

So here is a possible beginning for dealing with our weaknesses, we can say to ourselves — there are two kinds of elements in each situation; first, the things one cannot help, if the dinner has been burned, it is burned: if the A string snapped, it has snapped: but second, the things you can help, your attitude and corresponding action. Rebellions get us nowhere. Self-pity gets us nowhere. But to see what can be done with the weakness, there’s the fascinating part. As the card enclosed with your order of worship says: “If Life Hands You a Lemon. . . Make Lemonade!”

Paul did not want his thorn in the flesh, his weakness, whatever it was. He at first rebelled against it. “I prayed three times for the Lord to remove it,” he said. But I suspect there are qualities of understanding and sympathy in Paul and a deep and moving music in some of the great passages of his Epistles that never would have been there if he had not had to finish on three strings.

2. A second guideline for letting God turn our weakness into power is related to what we have just said. It is learning to accept ourselves as we are, with our weaknesses.

We are all aware of the famous serenity prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr, the first line of which goes, “God give me the serenity to accept what cannot be changed.”

Of course, there are many weaknesses we have that can be changed, but there are also some that cannot. Thus, our most important battle is often that of accepting ourselves as we are and not as we wish we were.

Part of the reason many of us get so upset over our weakness or limitation or handicap is that we keep comparing ourselves with others and wishing that we could be what they are and do what they do. We habitually measure ourselves alongside others and assume a responsibility for being as fortunate, as useful, as talented, as rich, as athletic, and as happy as they are. It is a big day in a person’s life when he or she makes up the mind that the responsibility of a person is not to be like someone else but to handle one’s own special situation as well as one can.

I think the Apostle Paul must've said to himself at one point, "I, Paul, hereby accept myself with the thorn in my flesh, and I do hereby throw off all responsibility for dealing with any other Paul than myself, and having thus accepted myself with my weakness, I will now fall to and see what good thing can be gotten out of myself in my own situation." And this is what happened. As a result of Paul's acceptance of himself and his own weakness, his weakness was on the way to becoming a source of strength.

Thus, it is not helpful to despise our weakness or our limitation or handicap. God does not judge us in crowds. God wants to know what each of us is doing in our own unique situation. That is all. If you say, "I am just as good as so and so," you have missed the point. Rather we hope God will say, "Well done, good and faithful servant, you had a desperate and difficult situation, and you handled it superbly.

3. There is a third guideline which the experience of the Apostle Paul gives us in regard to our weakness and what that weakness can do for us and how it can become strength.

Paul discovered that his weakness, his limitation, was a constant reminder that he was not self-sufficient and once he admitted this, he found that God res power truly flowed through him. It is as if our own inflated feeling of self-sufficiency blocks God's power in our lives. Our weakness, on the other hand, can be a reminder that we are never totally self-sufficient. Weakness then becomes strength.

Often when an individual comes for help or counseling, the person will say, "I feel so embarrassed about having to ask for help. I don't like this feeling of weakness which brings me here." But that very weakness is actually a strength. It shows the person is strong enough to admit to weakness — and intelligent enough to know when help is called for. There is incredible strength in weakness! It is a principle woven into the very fabric of life. Furthermore, the realization of our own inadequacy can in turn open us to the inexhaustible sufficiency of God.

One of the reasons Alcoholics Anonymous has been so successful is that it is built on the principle spelled out in the scripture for this day. Listen to the first three steps in A.A. First: we admitted that we were powerless over alcohol; that our lives had become unmanageable. Second: we came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. Third: We made a decision to turn our wills and our lives over to God as we understand him.

In weakness there can be incredible strength. Like Paul, our weal<ness can be a constant reminder of our own inadequacy and thus it can become a source for God's power to flow in and through us. Thus, it should not surprise us that creativity, the great things of life, often arise out of the pit of life, the weakness, the helplessness, rather than the high places. Often it is only when old molds and old ways of doing things are forcibly broken by need or by suffering that the creative process starts to flow. Then our weakness, our helplessness actually turns into strength.

So, in your weakness and in mine, it is possible to experience strength. Weakness can be a sign of strength. We can discover as did Paul — God's grace is sufficient, for where there is weakness, God's power is shown the more completely. Amen.