Sunday, June 30, 1985
POWER IN WEAKNESS
II Corinthians 12:7-10

Power in weakness! That sounds like a contradiction. Yet the Apostle Paul wrote, “When I am weak, then I am strong.” When the Apostle Paul wrote this statement, he was talking about how his own weakness had become a source of power to him. But it’s also true that the weakness of others can be a source of power not only to them but to us. There is a power that the powerless have. There is a power in weakness that is like no other. The power of God is often revealed in our weakness.

Here’s a true story of power in weakness.

A man said, “I grew up in the house where my brother Oliver was on his back in his bed for almost 33 years. Oliver was blind, mute. His legs were twisted. He didn’t have the strength to lift his head nor the intelligence to learn anything.

My family and I fed Oliver, we changed his diapers, hung his clothes and bed linen on the basement line in the winter, and spread them out white and clean on the lawn in the summer.

We bathed Oliver, tickled his chest to make him laugh. Sometimes we left the radio on in his room. We pulled the shade down over his bed in the morning to keep the sun from burning his tender skin. We listened to him laugh as we watched television downstairs. We listened to him rock his arms up and down to make the bed squeak. We listened to him cough in the middle of the night.

One October day in 1946, when my mother was pregnant with Oliver, her second son, she was overcome by fumes from a leaking coal-burning stove. My oldest brother was sleeping in his crib, which was quite high off the ground, so the gas didn’t affect him. My father pulled them outside, where my mother revived quickly.

On April 20, 1947, Oliver was born. A healthy-looking, plump, beautiful boy. One afternoon, a few months later, my mother brought Oliver to a window. She held him there in the sun, the bright good sun, and there Oliver looked and looked directly into the sunlight, which was the first moment my mother realized that Oliver was blind. My parents, the true heroes of this story, learned with the passing months that blindness was only part of the problem. So they brought Oliver to Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York for tests to determine the extent of his condition.

The doctor said that he wanted to make it very clear to both my mother and father that there was absolutely nothing that could be done for Oliver. He didn’t want my parents to grasp at false hope. “You could place him in an institution,” the doctor said. But my parents replied, “He is our son. We will take Oliver home, of course.” And the doctor replied, “Then take him home and love him.”

Oliver grew to the size of a ten-year-old. He had a big chest, a large head. His hands and feet were those of a five-year-old, small and soft. We’d wrap a box of baby cereal for him at Christmas and place it under the tree, pat his head with a damp cloth in the middle of a July heat wave. His baptismal certificate hung on the wall above his head, a bishop came to the house and confirmed him.

Oliver died on on March 12, 1980, Oliver still remains. The weakest, most helpless human being I ever met, and yet he was one of the most powerful human beings I ever met. He could do absolutely nothing except breathe, sleep, eat, and yet he was responsible for action, love, courage, insight.

So often parents are faced with a child who is severely retarded, but who is also hyperactive, demanding, or wild, who needs constant care. So many people have little choice but to place their child in an institution. We were fortunate that Oliver didn't need us to be in his room all day. He never knew what his condition was. We were blessed with his presence, a true presence of peace.

There is power in weakness! We can get power from our own weakness, and there is a power in the weakness of others.

How can we get power from our own weakness? Look at what happened with the Apostle Paul. He first said that he prayed to God to have his weakness, his handicap, removed. I'm sure we've had that experience. Perhaps you've prayed fervently for God to remove some particular weakness.

However, God's answer, as experienced by Paul, was, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." In other words, Paul found a new source of strength in God because of his weakness. It was a constant reminder to him that he (Paul) was not self-sufficient. The weakness or handicap remained, but it no longer mattered in the same way. It was submerged, it was swallowed up, it was transcended. It became a continual reminder of God's power. We often find God more in our weakness than in our strength.

Paul then no longer felt sorry for himself. He no longer asked, "Why did this happen to me?" or "What have I done to deserve this weakness?" 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 her or his life under the ideal conditions that he or she would have chosen?

Our weakness can become a power for others, and the weakness of others can become power for us. This is at the heart of the Christian story. In fact, the Bible tells us that we are healed by the wounds of Christ (I Peter 2:24). The weakness of Christ becomes power to us. The weakness of Oliver in the story told earlier revealed God to his brother more than anything else he had experienced.

So also our weakness can become a source of power to others, and theirs to us. It takes into account what Henri Nouwen calls "the wounded healer." This does not mean that we talk about our own weakness or wounds to others, but rather that because we acknowledge within ourselves our weakness or our wounds, we are more sensitive and more empathetic.

Weakness can be strength because sometimes it takes a person's weakness for us to see God in another, and then God in us. Here's one woman's experience. She said, "In the early stages of my father's cancer, I found it very difficult to know how best to help. I lived a thousand miles away and would come for visits. It was hard seeing him going downhill, harder still feeling so clumsy, not sure what to do, what to say.

Toward the end, I was called to come suddenly. He'd been slipping. I went straight from the airport to the hospital, then directly to the room he was in. When I entered, I saw that I'd made a mistake. There was a very, very old man there, pale and hairless, thin and breathing with great gasps, fast asleep, seemingly near death. So I turned to find my dad's room. Then I froze. I suddenly realized, 'My God, that's him!' I hadn't recognized my own father! It was the single most shocking moment in my life.

Thank God he was asleep. All I could do was sit next to him and try to get past this image before he woke up and saw my shock. I had to look through him and find something beside this astonishing appearance of a father I could barely recognize physically.

By the time he awoke, I'd gotten part of the way, but we were still quite uncomfortable with one another. There was still this sense of distance. We could both feel it. It was very painful. We were both self-conscious.

Several days later, I came into his room and found him asleep again. Again such a hard sight. So I sat and looked some more. Suddenly this thought came to me, words of Mother Teresa describing lepers she cared for as "Christ in all his distressing disguises."

Then I had a new vision of my dad — I saw his identity as a child of God. That was who he really was, behind the distressing disguise. And it was my real identity too, I felt. I felt a great bond with him then which wasn't anything like I'd felt as father and daughter.

For the remaining months of his life, we were totally at peace and comfortable together. No more self-consciousness. No unfinished business. I usually seemed to know just what was needed. I could feed him, shave him, bathe him, hold him up to fix the pillow — all these very intimate things that had been so hard for me earlier.

In a way, this was my father's final gift to me: in his weakness, the chance to see him as something more than my father; the chance to see the common identity of spirit we both shared. There is power in weakness, God's power."

When Winston Churchill first met Gandhi of India, he could not understand how this weak, small individual could have power. In a speech to the House of Commons in 1931, he expressed his revulsion at the "nauseating and humiliating spectacle of this one-time temple lawyer, striding half-naked up the steps of the Viceroy's palace, there to negotiate and parley on equal terms with the representative of the King-Emperor of the British Empire." We who believe ourselves to be so strong have difficulty in understanding the power of the weak.

By the world's standards, Jesus Christ was weak. He had no army, no guns. He didn't fight back when crucified, but there is a power in his weakness that overcomes the world. And that power is still at work in our world and many times we discover it in weakness. It is the power of God. Amen.