Sunday, July 21, 1991
TURNING WEAKNESS INTO STRENGTH
II Corinthians 12:7-10

Is there anyone listening who does not have some kind of weakness, some limitation, some handicap, or some kind of personal problem? Or is your life perfect in every way? It has been my experience that in each one of us there is at least one thing — and no doubt more than one thing — that we wish were different. It is not that some people are disabled while others are not. The new way of saying it is that we are “differently abled.”

Some of us are near-sighted in one or both eyes, while others are far-sighted, and so we wear glasses to aid us in our seeing. Especially as we live longer, some of us need assistance in our hearing. It’s one of the strange facts about us that we will more easily give in to wearing glasses than using a hearing aid. Or maybe you have weak legs or ankles or walk with a limp because one leg is shorter than the other. Is there anyone among us who does not need some kind of crutch?

Maybe you’re subject to periodic depressions or fits of temper that you don’t like but find difficult to control. Some of us have weak hearts, and others have flat feet. And there are others among us who are struggling with cancer of one kind or another. In each one of our lives, there is something about us that we wish were different. Thus, one of the most perplexing problems we face is acknowledging and handling our particular weakness or the way in which we are differently abled.

Isn’t it true that most of us, at one time or another, have looked at another person and thought to ourselves, “I wish I was like that. I wish I had her talent, or his looks, or her strength, or his ability at playing golf, or her skill in dealing with people, or her curly hair. Or I wish I could be that kind of mother or husband.”

Or here is a longer-living woman who in youth and young adulthood had all the natural ambitions 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 have the fame of which she dreamed.

Still, others among us have, through no fault of their own, been involved in accidents that have completely altered their way of living.

Or here is a life that wanted love so desperately and missed it; or here is a home where marriage and family might have been a lifelong relationship of beauty but became instead 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 trouble that he or she must face and deal with. Is it possible to turn weakness into strength, to turn a liability into an asset? What does our Christian faith have to say? What guidance does it give us?

As one example, let’s consider St. Paul, the Apostle. Like all the rest of us, he had his weakness, his “thorn-in-the-flesh,” as he called it. I suspect he had others in addition to this one, but this particular weakness gave him a lot of trouble. Many and varied have been the

guesses of New Testament scholars and others as to what his affliction was. Some think it might have been defective eyesight; others, a recurrent form of malaria; and still others think it could have been epileptic seizures.

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

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

No doubt many of us have also prayed fervently for God to remove our particular problem, weakness, or limitation. And we have been disappointed. We know from our own experience that God does not automatically and unfailingly free human beings from every illness, problem, or handicap. The Bible reminds us over and over again that the purpose of prayer is not to change God but to change us. And how we are changed can be something quite different than we at first expected.

Paul, for example, found that with God’s help, he was able to turn his weakness into a source of strength. According to Paul, God said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” The weakness, or handicap, or illness 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 the 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, his “thorn-in-the-flesh,” he now found a new strength that gave him victory — not only to accept the handicap that harassed him, but also the hardships and oppositions that met him. He learned a new style of life — his weakness became strength.

And the good news is that the same thing can happen to you and to me. We can turn our weakness into strength. In fact, Paul’s experience gives us the guidelines for helping this to happen.

Note first that Paul said that he had, after a struggle, cheerfully made up his mind to be proud of his weakness. To put it another way, he took a positive attitude toward his weakness instead of a negative one. He stopped feeling sorry for himself. This is the first step in letting God help us turn our weakness into strength.
However, like many of us, before Paul came to this kind of decision, he felt sorry for himself. We know how it is. We ask, “Why did this happen to me? What have I done to deserve this problem? Why can’t I be like other people? What great things I could do were it not for this handicap.”

These are some of our first natural reactions. But as Paul discovered, it's not a very efficient or helpful way of dealing with our limitations or other kinds of personal problems.

Paul discovered, as you and I can discover, that a person can rather say to himself or herself, "Do you suppose I am the only person in the world with some kind of weakness, handicap, or problem? 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 a famous violinist who, while giving a concert, had the A string break in the middle of a composition. The violinist transposed the music and finished it on three strings. Fosdick went on to say, "That's life — to have 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 weakness or problem, it can then begin to present itself as an opportunity — always challenging, sometimes fascinating. It is a good cook who, after the dinner has burned, knows how to make a fine meal out of the leftovers, and a good cook will try.

So here is a beginning for dealing with whatever weaknesses or problems we have. 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 has been burned; if I have cancer, I have cancer; if my marriage has failed, it has failed. Second, the things I can help — my attitude and corresponding action. Self-pity gets us nowhere. But to see what can be done with the weakness or problem — that's the fascinating part. As the old saying goes, 'If life hands you a lemon, make lemonade.'"

Paul did not want his thorn-in-the-flesh, whatever it was. He did not choose it. 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 empathy in Paul and a deep and moving music in some of the memorable passages of his letters that never would have been there if he had not had to finish on three strings.

A second guideline for letting God help us to turn our weakness into strength is related to what I have just said. It is learning to accept ourselves as we are, with our weaknesses, handicaps, and problems.
Of course, there are weaknesses and limitations 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.

Perhaps you read the story on the sports page of the newspaper last week about former San Francisco Giants pitcher, Dave Dravecky. Or maybe you saw him interviewed on television as I did. Looking fit and rested, Dravecky said he views last month's surgery as only a temporary setback. He went on to say, "There are adjustments that I have to make, but there's nothing out there that I don't want to do." Although his future won't include playing professional baseball, he said he will swim, play golf and tennis, and engage in other sports he was unable to enjoy in the past because of his baseball contract.

In September 1988, Dravecky was diagnosed as having cancer, and he underwent surgery to remove a tumor and nearly half of the deltoid muscle in his left arm. He made a dramatic comeback to the major leagues on August 10, 1989, but five days later broke his arm while pitching in Montreal. He broke his arm again in October 1989 and retired from baseball the following month. After further surgery, doctors amputated his left arm and shoulder last month.

“There’s no struggle about feeling sorry for myself,” said Dravecky. “The question is not, ‘Why me, God?’ The question is ‘What is your plan for me now?’ Without God’s help, I would not have the strength to endure this.”

As I listened to him being interviewed on television, he went on to say that he had to learn to accept himself as he now is, and that he has done this. His wife and children have been supportive throughout. After his young son looked him over following the amputation, he ran out and invited his friends to come and look. “It became show and tell,” he said.

One of the reasons many of us get so upset over our weakness or limitation or handicap or personal problem is that we keep comparing ourselves with others and wishing that we could be what they are and do what they do. We 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.

God does not judge us in crowds or compare us with others. God wants to know what each one of us is doing in our own unique situation. That is all. If you say, “I’m just as good as so and so,” you have missed the point. Rather, I hope God will say, “Well done, good and faithful servant, you had a desperate and difficult situation, and you handled it superbly.”

There is a third guideline that the experience of the Apostle Paul gives us in regard to our weakness and how it can be turned into strength.
Paul discovered that his weakness, his limitation, was a constant reminder that he was not self-sufficient or independent, and once he admitted this, he found that God’s power truly flowed through him. It is as if our feeling that we can fix everything ourselves blocks God’s power from working in our lives. Our weakness, on the other hand, can be a reminder that we are never totally self-sufficient, and so our weakness is actually turned into strength.

Frequently when a person comes for help or counseling, he or she 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 weakness and intelligent enough to know when help is called for. In this way, there is incredible strength in weakness. It’s 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.

Many persons have testified that the most spectacular answers to prayer have often come following a period when they could do nothing for themselves at all.

It should not surprise us that creativity, the great things in life, often arise out of the pit of life, the weakness, the helplessness, rather than the high places. For creativity is the ability to put old material into new forms. And it is only when old molds and old ways of doing things are forcibly broken up by need, or by suffering, compelling us to regroup, to rethink, to begin again,

that the creative process starts to flow. Then our weakness, our helplessness, is turned into strength.

So in your weakness, in your problems, in your limitations, let God's word come to you as it did to Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you, for where there is weakness, my power is shown more completely." Amen.