Sunday, July 17, 1994
POWER IN WEAKNESS
II Corinthians 12:7-10

God's power is frequently revealed in weakness — our personal weakness and the weakness of our institutions and organizations. The Apostle Paul wrote, "When I am weak, then I am strong."

How much God's power is revealed in our weakness was made especially visible to me and to the members of our choir and Plymouth Brass, along with others who were with us on our recent trip to Coventry, England. That's why the sermon I preached in St. Michael's Coventry Cathedral was on the theme "Power in Weakness."

St. Michael's Cathedral in Coventry was heavily bombed along with the rest of the city in the late fall of 1940. The cathedral itself was mostly destroyed. All that was left standing were the foundation, the stone walls, and the tower. The weakness of the cathedral building compared to the power of the bombs is still evident. But God's power has continued to work through that weakness.

Even though England was at war with Germany, the leaders of the Cathedral decided the message of the church had to remain the message of Christ — reconciliation. These church leaders knew that wars come to an end and that following war, building peace is a difficult task.

After the war ended, the leaders of the cathedral began a number of programs to encourage and foster reconciliation, and many of those programs continue. They also decided that they needed to rebuild the cathedral. A number of architects were invited to submit proposals. Some of them proposed demolishing the walls and tower and starting over. The plan that was finally adopted, however, was to leave the walls and tower of the old cathedral standing as a reminder of the destruction that war can bring, and to build a new cathedral next to the ruins of the old. And that's what was done. The new building was completed in 1964. As I looked at the walls and tower of the old cathedral, they reminded me that the power of God is stronger than any of our buildings or institutions and that the power of God can be revealed in our weakness.

There can be a power in weakness that is like no other. The power of God is often revealed in our weakness. This is as true of individuals as it is of institutions. Here's the story of an individual whose weakness revealed God's power.

A man wrote: "I grew up in a house where my brother, Oliver, was on his back in his bed for almost 33 years. He was blind and mute. His legs were twisted. He didn't have 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."

“How did Oliver get this way? 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 quickly 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 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, and we will take him 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.”

“We’d 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 March 12, 1980. Oliver remains the weakest, most helpless human being I ever met, and at the same time, he was one of the most powerful human beings I ever met. He could do absolutely nothing except breathe, sleep, and eat, and yet he was responsible for action, love, courage, and insight.”

“When I was small, my mother would say, ‘Isn’t it wonderful you can see?’ And once she said, ‘When you go to heaven, Oliver will run to you, embrace you, and the first thing he will say is ‘thank you.’ I also remember that my mother explained to me that we were blessed with Oliver in ways that were not clear to her at first.”

“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 that comes to us from the weakness of others.

How can we get power from our own weakness? Look at what happened to the Apostle Paul. He first said that he prayed to God to have his weakness, his handicap, removed. I’m sure you’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 constant 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 or handicap?" 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've chosen?

Our weakness can also become a source of power for others, and the weakness of others can become a source of 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. The weakness of Christ becomes power to us. The weakness of Oliver, in the story told earlier, revealed God to his brother and the other members of the family more than anything else they 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 with others.

Weakness can be a source of 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 best how 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 or 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 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 of 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 besides this astonishing appearance of a father that 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, 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... like 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 possessed.” There is a power in weakness, God’s power. This is true personally and corporately.

When Winston Churchill first met Gandhi of India, he could not understand how this weak, small individual could have power or how his thousands of followers without guns or weapons of any kind could have power. Who were they to stand up to the British Empire? In a speech to the House of Commons in 1931, Churchill 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 British Empire.”

In the civil rights movement under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the powers of state, as vested in the sheriffs and other authorities, could not understand how people without guns or weapons could have any power at all. We who believe ourselves to be so strong have difficulty 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 best in weakness. It is the power of God. Amen.