Your strength is made perfect in weakness

Carol Martin

July 11, 2021

Mark 6:1-13

2 Corinthians12:2-10

The lectionary scriptures this week, at least in the gospel and the epistle, are about embracing vulnerability, or in the Holy Spirit’s words to Paul, “Your strength is made perfect in weakness.” Jesus sends out the disciples with just the clothes on their backs and they come back rejoicing about the amazing outcome of casting out demons and healing sick people. Paul, after a stunning heavenly revelation, receives a thorn in the flesh and is given the paradoxical wisdom: be thankful for your weakness.

Gail and I have been keeping Nathan a bit this week while Matthias is away. We consider it a great privilege and a lot of fun. Tuesday, he just would not take a nap even though we took turns rocking him, Gail took him to a darkened room, we played, read books, sang, and did patty cake. He just squirmed and grinned at us and insisted on his own way. His behavior is just a perfect image of my resistance to rejoicing in weakness and finding strength in it.

I resist, I squirm, I get busy and distract myself. I have not yet fully accepted the fact that I am really, really old. I am just beginning to learn the developmental task of hallowing my diminishments, of finding strength in the increasing weakness of my body and even more, my mind.

One of the frightening things for me is that my mother had severe dementia and she was like a little girl in her old age. I wonder, “how was that strength for her?” A page from *Seized by the Power of a Great Affection* speaks to me in Gordon’s realistic and wise voice:

For all of us there will come a time when our knowing and doing will be greatly diminished: perhaps memory loss will leave us with little capacity to expand our knowledge or even to recognize our loved ones, and for all of us, unless we die suddenly we will become helpless, unable to act on our own or another’s behalf. Are we no longer persons at this point? Is there anything beneath the knowing and doing?

There *has* to be something beneath our knowing and doing. We have so many examples of friends who entered into that diminishment in faith and trust. When I was first a member of Church of the Savior, I knew and loved Luella Stanton. She was already sick when I met her, and not too long after she died of cancer, but when she was still able to come to church, I met her coming down the staircase at 2025 and asked, “How are you, Luella?” She answered with enthusiasm, “Oh, honey, I’m on a collision course!” Not a bit of self-pity in that woman.

Mary Jo Cook and Lee Porter both entered into Alzheimer’s with courage and positiveness. And Gordon and Mary embodied the wisdom and trust they’d been teaching us about all their lives. Terry tells of Mary’s last hour when she held up her arms as if she were preparing to be embraced from beyond. Bud’s illness and death took away my fear of diminishment, as he kidded about his growing weakness by parading around our house in long johns, carrying his cane, and pretending to be Maurice Chevalier, the debonair French actor. And, most of all, Emmy Lu, who continues to live more fully than most people far younger. She always looks spiffy. She and I love to get together and sing old torch songs from the 40s and 50s. She and Gail play Rummikub most afternoons and she wins a lot of the time. We all have many examples of friends who have gracefully welcomed old age and its losses.

We older ones in the community are constantly being reassured that we will always be loved and accompanied. One time I asked Mike Little if he would still love me if I lost my mind. He said yes. Then I said, “Will you make fun of me?” and he said, “Not to your face.” That was so reassuring. And we all know Dixcy will be there to pull the plug for us!

No, really. It appears to me that these last years are an opportunity to rest in the love of family and friends and especially to learn to rest in the love of our Maker, Redeemer and Friend. For a while, I was thinking I needed to remember everyone I should make reparations to and ask their forgiveness, but the list got so long I just let go of it. I’m too tired. I do pray for each one that they can forgive me. I’m hoping that is a form of respecting my diminishment.

This is how Gordon answered his own question that I read before:

Is there anything beneath the knowing and doing? Is there a real eternal self that we can claim now and begin to deepen and expand into forever? The determining question is whether or not this unique, deeper person exists.

We can keep living from the shallow, surface self or we can claim, the real, the deep, the inner self where the Spirit of God already dwells. Only then do we become free. … This inner place of freedom is our true home.

When I was nineteen, I read a sonnet by Dorothy Sayers and the octave had these words, “to the still place where the earth turns on its axis, to the heart of rest…” I had no idea what it meant, but it gripped me then and I typed it on a 3x5 card and kept it on my bulletin board. When I wrote my first spiritual autobiography to join the church in 1970, I used the quote as an epigraph.

What I have learned about that still place is that in the friendly darkness of silence there is rest and peace and depth. I’ve learned that silence can be an interactive thing. Sometimes there is help to be aware of my egotism and selfishness and also a lovely kindness toward my pain about that egotism and selfishness. There’s almost nothing like centering prayer to help in receiving strength out of weakness.

Recently, I’ve found two Christian sages whose words inspire me and strengthen me as I try to move beyond the knowing and doing and begin to let go into the deep waters of the Spirit.

The first is Karl Rahner:

If I should take my stand on the shore of Your Endlessness and shout into the trackless reaches of Your Being all the words I have ever learned in the poor prison of my little existence, what should I have said? ...God of my life, Incomprehensible, be my life. God of my faith, who lead me into Your darkness -- God of my love, who turn Your darkness into the sweet light of my life, be now the God of my hope, so that You will one day be the God of my life, the life of eternal love.

And the second Dante Alighieri.

The good mariner, when he draws near to the harbor, lets down his sails, and enters it gently with slight headway on; so we ought to let down the sails of our worldly pursuits, and turn to God with all our understanding and heart, so that we may come to that harbor with all compassion and with all peace.