

The Weakness of God

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 4th Sunday after Epiphany, January 28, 1990. Scripture Lessons: Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 37:1-11; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Last night at the dinner table I was talking with my boys about the Super Bowl teams. We all agreed that San Francisco had the strongest team by far with Joe Montana at quarterback. I asked the expert in the family about the respective strengths and weaknesses of Denver. We were pretty much convinced that Denver didn't have much of a chance but that's who I'm rooting for.

Since I hadn't finished my sermon yet I then asked if they thought that God had any weaknesses. They couldn't think of any. It's hard to imagine that God has any weaknesses at all. He created the universe by the power of his word. He brought the plagues upon Egypt and divided the Red Sea and led his people on dry ground to the Promised Land. He provided for his people for forty years in the desert as Moses led them on. When they reached the promised land he raised up great military leaders like Joshua and Deborah and the greatest of all, King David. How could there be any weaknesses in God?

And yet St. Paul, in a very striking image, speaks of the weakness of God: "the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength." I want us to think about the weakness of God which is stronger than our strength. Our Reformed tradition has always stressed the sovereignty of God. I'm not used to thinking about the weakness of God. Then I began to ask myself, "What do people consider to be weakness." When you say of someone, "That person is weak. She's not very strong." What characteristics does that person have? Then I began to think about Jesus. And I began to think that,

2. What did I hope would happen? I wanted peoples to see God in a different light, as weak; not strong... so as to break down resistance to God's power

I was basically trying to say in my sermon that God's weakness is powerful enough to break down all my strong defenses,

by human standards, Jesus did have some weaknesses and I began to understand a little better what Paul meant when he spoke of the weakness of God.

First, the weakness of God is seen in the tears of Jesus. When you see a full grown man crying do you think of strength or weakness? I've sometimes seen full-grown men cry. Nearly always, the man who is crying apologizes. "I'm sorry. I lost control of myself." Weak men cry? That's the world's wisdom.

Do you remember the presidential campaign... I believe it was 1972? Edmund Muskie of Maine was running in the Democratic primaries. He was doing fairly well until he became the center of a controversy. He wasn't involved in a sex scandal. He wasn't involved in anything dishonest or illegal. He simply shed tears in public at one point during his campaign.

Do you remember how the news media picked this up? Do you remember how his qualifications were questioned. Do we want a president who cries? Do we want a president who isn't strong enough to control his feelings? Tears are a sign of weakness. After those tears Muskie didn't stand a chance of being president.

The shortest verse in the whole bible is, "Jesus wept." He was standing outside the tomb of his friend Lazarus. The weakness of Jesus is displayed in his tears. But therein is also the strength of Jesus. The Gospel writer wants us to know, not only that Jesus wept, but that Jesus is the human face of God. In Jesus we see a side of God that had never been seen before. In Jesus we see that there are tears in the heart of God.

G. A. Studdert-Kennedy the WWI poet priest once wrote,
Are there no tears in the heart of the Eternal?
Is there no pain to pierce the soul of God?
Then must He be a fiend of Hell infernal,
Beating the earth to pieces with His rod.

Studdert-Kennedy

It's the power of those tears that draws me close to Christ, and through Christ, to God. The very weakness of God has power to break down my resistance to God's authority in my life. I want to open my life to God.

Secondly, the weakness of God is seen in the parables of the prodigal son. The parables are windows through which we see something of what the God who created the universe is like. The parable of the Prodigal Son is really the parable of the Waiting Father. You're familiar with the story. We're so familiar with the story that we don't realize just how foolish and weak the father in that parable would have appeared to those who first heard the story. Jesus tells the story of a father who, by the standards of his day, was a rather weak and foolish man. He was certainly not the typical strong, dignified, authoritarian Jewish father. He lets his son go into the far country. He doesn't use his power to keep the boy at home.

And when the prodigal returns the father is so weak that he does something that no strong, dignified Palestinian father would ever do. He runs to embrace his son. He gives his son a ring, and sandals, and orders the fattened calf to be killed. He brings his son into ~~to~~ a feast.

The people who heard that parable for the first time would have shaken their heads and thought, "What a weak father. What a foolish man." And yet Jesus is saying, "This is what God is like... like the weak, foolish waiting father who welcomes back the prodigal child. When I see God like ^{I return to him when I've wandered,} that I'm empowered to trust him ~~and want to serve him.~~

Third, the weakness of God is seen when Jesus washed the disciples feet. Jesus was taking on the role of a slave when he washed his disciples feet. This would have been viewed as a foolish and humiliating expression of weakness. And yet Jesus is saying, in his act of washing the disciples feet, this is what God is like. God's strength is displayed in the weakness

of humble service. Do you want to see God at work in the world? You will see God at work in the acts of humble service. When I see the weakness of God on his knees washing the feet of his disciples I'm empowered to want to serve others.

Fourth, the weakness of God is seen in how God forgives. What do you think of a person who repeatedly forgives someone? A strong person might forgive once or twice but not over and over again.

Think of the parable of the unmerciful servant. Peter asked Jesus, "How many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." The Jesus goes on to tell the story of a king who wants to settle accounts. A subject who owed him millions of dollars was brought to him. Since he wasn't able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. But the servant fell on his knees before him and cried out, "Be patient with me and I'll pay back everything." A strong person, from a human point of view, would've been unyielding. The strong person would've been untouched. But the master in the parable is not untouched. He weakens. He doesn't want to see his servant and wife and family reduced to slavery. He forgives the servant everything.

This is what God is like Jesus is saying. He's weak when it comes to forgiveness. He isn't willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

I once heard engineer tell me about a tour he took of a factory. He was led around by the foreman and shown all the machinery which he was very interested in because of his engineering background. When they came to the end of the tour the engineer went to shake hands with his tour guide.

Refers to
wonder

The foreman's hand was like dead fish. He was embarrassed and apologized for his weak handshake. He explained, "I had an accident years ago. A spike was driven through the palm of my hand severing all the muscles and tendons. Ever since then I haven't been able to close my hand.

On the cross we see in Jesus God with his hands pinned down. They drove spikes through his hands and ever since that day God has not been able to close his hands to us.

This is why the story of the Cross, for those who have ears to hear, is the greatest story in the world, and why whenever we hear it we face a life or death decision. For the Christ who died brings us up against the ultimate choice. Faced with this demonstration of God's love, do I continue to grasp my life for myself and to go on to die? Or do I yield myself to Him who loved me and gave himself for me, and so go on to live?

By surrendering to this God we find the secret of an unselfish and eternal life.

Amen

Let us pray: O God, your gospel has the strength to set free those who are entangled and imprisoned by their own sins. Grant power to every member of your church that, being ambassadors for Christ, they may so speak of him - crucified, risen and alive today - that others may come to share in the freedom of your children; through the power of his name and for the sake of his name. Amen.

Prayers of the People

How great is your name, Lord our God, through all the earth! Your majesty is praised above the heavens. When we see the vastness of space, all of your making, the galaxies and stars you have arranged, we are amazed that you keep us in mind, that you care for us. Yet, you have made us in your image; you have caused JESUS CHRIST to appear among us, and we are crowned with glory and honor because of his suffering and death. You have put all things under his feet.

We pray for the leaders of our nation: Grant, O Lord, to all our leaders the wisdom to seek what is right, and the goodness to do it; may learning, education, and politics all be directed to good ends, and may love of you lead us all to peace among the nations.

We pray for the church: Lord of the church, enable your people to be the church: a redeemed people; a holy people; a united people; a missionary people; and a people submissive to the truth as it comes to us in JESUS.

Let us pray for the rebuilding of our church: Almighty Father, you have given us the task of building a new church where generations yet unborn will worship you: Look graciously upon our

efforts; inspire us by your spirit, that we may not become despondent, but have faith to match all difficulties, believing that in your strength we may soon lay its foundations with joy, and build its walls in hope.

For the sick, suffering, for unbelieving

For the communion of saints.

Lord's prayer.