

1. Conf. BILL NEW FACES + OLD
Rebuilding in Oct

The Weakness of God

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on August 4, 1991 at Knox United Presbyterian Church, Kenmore, NY. Scripture Lessons: Luke 15:11-24; John 11:33-37; Matthew 27:38-44; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Saint Paul, in a very striking image, speaks of the weakness of God: "the weakness of God is stronger than human 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. But as I thought about what Saint Paul said about the weakness of God as compared to human strength, I began to ask myself, "What do people consider to be weakness in a person?" When you say of someone, "That person is weak", what characteristics does that person have?

Then I began to think about Jesus. I began to think that, 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 grown man crying do you think of strength or do you think of weakness? I've sometimes seen 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 in 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. The scene was flashed by the news media across the nation that evening. The political pundits questioned his qualifications. 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 elected president.

The shortest verse in the whole Bible is, "Jesus wept." He was standing outside the tomb of his friend Lazarus who had been dead for three days. The weakness of Jesus is displayed in his tears. But the weakness of his tears is stronger than the display of any human strength. 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 when those whom he loves die.

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.

And again he writes,

When Jesus came to Golgotha they hanged Him on a tree,
They drove great nails through hands and feet, and made a Calvary;
They crowned Him with a crown of thorns, red were His wounds and deep,
For those were crude and cruel days, and human flesh was cheap.

When Jesus came to Birmingham (Buffalo) they simply passed Him by,
They never hurt a hair of Him, they only let Him die;
For men had grown more tender, and they would not give Him pain,
They only just passed down the street, and left Him in the rain.

Still Jesus cried, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do,"
And still it rained the wintry rain that drenched Him through and through;
The crowds went home and left the streets without a soul to see,
And Jesus crouched against a wall and cried for Calvary.

Jesus reveals to us God's weakness. Our God is a crying God. Our God is a god who sheds tears as looks down on our world. It's the power of those tears, the tears of God, 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.

Second, the weakness of God is seen in the actions of Jesus, especially when he 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. Strong people find ways to avoid humiliating jobs. 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 most clearly, not in signs and wonders and miraculous displays of power but in the acts of humble service. When you think of God, are you most likely to think of him high and lifted up seated up a throne of glory, or do you see him dressed like a hospital orderly cleaning out bed-pans? The thought of ^{God Almighty} Jesus on his knees washing the feet of his disciples has more power to motivate

me to visit the sick, shut-ins and hospitalized than threats of judgment.

Thirdly, the weakness of God is seen in the teaching of Jesus, especially the parable 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 it that we don't realize just how foolish and weak the father in that parable would have appeared to those who first heard the store.

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.

Ken Bailey, a biblical scholar who has spent many years in Palestine and knows the culture well, describes how, in order to run to meet his son, the father would have had to gather his long flowing robes above his knees and tie it around his waist. Everybody could see his skinny legs. No one but Jesus would describe the God of Israel as a Palestinian father running, bare legged, to welcome his prodigal son.

The people who heard that parable for the first time would have

On the cross the wisdom of God is displayed as foolishness... God's presence is revealed in the cry of God forsakenness... God's power is displayed in powerlessness.

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 that weak, foolish waiting father who welcomes back his prodigal sons and daughters." He's weak when it comes to forgiveness.

What do you think of a person who repeatedly forgives someone or who forgives so easily. One who will not even let the prodigal complete his confession of sin; who not only fails to scold his son for his wicked lifestyle but inundates him with gifts. Is this what a strong father would do. How weak, God is when it comes to forgiveness. When I see God like that I'm empowered to trust him and return to him no matter what I've done

or how far I've wandered. ~~Att of~~ So I see the weakness of God in Jesus... in his tears... in his service... in his parables... but above all I see the weakness of God on the cross.

An industrial engineer once took a tour 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. The foreman's hand was limp and weak like a 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 anyone who comes to him in faith. "The one who comes

On the cross we see God, in Christ, in weakness. God, in Christ, becomes an outcast of society so that outcasts may have a bond with him, God, in Christ, is condemned as a criminal and dies among thieves; he is forsaken by all his friends to be with those who are alone; he becomes utterly helpless to be with those who have no help. The cross shows us God in God's weakness, allowing us to use our power to resist God.

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to me I will in no wise cast out.”

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 be strong and wise in grasping and controlling my own life for myself? Or do I yield myself to Him who loved me and gave himself for me and go on to live the life eternal?

Let us pray: O God, whose blessed Son became weak so that we might become powerful and became foolish, so that we might become wise unto salvation, deliver us from our love of power, signs and wonders; our desire for success at any price; give us the mind of Christ.