

## The Weakness of God

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 6th Sunday of Easter, May 16, 1993. Scripture Lessons: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; John 11:28-37; Luke 15:11-24; John 13:1-5, 12-16; ~~Matthew 27:38-42 a.~~ Matthew 27:38-42 a.

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

St. Paul, in a very striking image, speaks of the weakness of God: "the weakness of God", he says, "is stronger than human strength." "The weakness of God is stronger than human strength." I'd like to talk about the weakness of God which is stronger than our strength.

Fifteen years ago I torn my achilles tendon. I tore it playing volleyball at the YWCA. I didn't know at first it was a torn achilles tendon. I thought it was just a sprained ankle. I hobbled out to my car after showering and thought I was going to drive myself to the hospital. I had a standard shift car at the time. I tried to push down the clutch with my bad foot. I couldn't do it. I was frustrated. Someone else had to drive me to the hospital. I was in a cast for over five months. A month and a half after the surgery I was still in a cast when Kay gave birth to Andrew. Andrew was a big, strong, healthy baby. I was weak with my torn achilles tendon. I hobbled around with a cast on my leg and used crutches and Andrew was big and strong and healthy. But my weakness was stronger than Andrew's strength. Andrew wouldn't walk for about a year. I hobbled on my weak ankle, but my weakness was stronger than Andrew's strength.

God's weakness is stronger than our strength, Paul tells us. God has a bad achilles tendon. God has a weakness, but God's weakness is stronger than our strength. What is God's weakness? How could God possibly have any weaknesses?

Think about Jesus. Jesus is God in the flesh. By human standards, Jesus had some weaknesses. He had some characteristics that American men and women consider weaknesses.

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

Do you remember the presidential campaign of 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 when he encountered a human tragedy. The news media picked this up? Do you remember how his qualifications to govern were called into question? "Do we want a president who cries in public? 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 his 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.

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.

There's at least one thing that almighty God is unable to do. God can't remain unmoved in the face of human tragedy. Those tears draw me close to Christ, and through Christ to God. Those tears are able to do what raw power could never do. God's weakness has power to break down my resistance to God's authority in my life.

- 2) Secondly, the weakness of God is seen when Jesus washed the disciples feet. In the culture of his day, no strong, self-respecting man would stoop to wash the feet of another man. That was women's work. That was work befitting a slave. 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? Don't look for miraculous "signs and wonders",

Paul says. You will see God at work in acts of humble service. ~~Threats of~~ *I have never liked*  
*to work much. But when I was a boy I would often, voluntarily, help my man*  
*punishment are not likely to get me to serve others humbly. Threats make me dig*  
*and had with these work; painting; planting a garden; fix up the car, -*  
*my heels in proudly. But when I see the weakness of God on his knees washing the*  
*their example did more to encourage me to work than ~~threats~~ powerful threats*  
*feet of his disciples. I'm empowered to want to serve others.*  
*and force. God's weakness in this area of humble service is a more powerful*  
*incentive for me than threats.*

Thirdly, God is weak when it comes to forgiveness. 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 Forgiving 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 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's weakness illustrated by the parable of the waiting father, I'm empowered to trust God and return to God when I have wandered. God's weakness is more powerful in bringing back home than any exhibition of raw power (see Ken Bailey's work on Luke 15).

God is weak when it comes to forgiveness. He isn't willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

4). *God's weakness, above all is seen on the cross of Christ.*

An industrial engineer once toured a factory. He was led around by the foreman.

The foreman showed the engineer the assembly lines, the machinery, and the administrative space. He introduced him to workers and supervisors and management. When they came to the end of the tour the industrial engineer held out his right hand to shake hands with the foreman and to thank him for taking so much time to show him through the factory. The foreman responded by offering his right hand for a hand shake. But the foreman's hand was like a dead fish. It was limp. He did not squeeze the hand of the engineer. The foreman simply placed this limp hand into the right hand of the engineer. The foreman 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.

Strong men once stretched out God's hands on the cross. God once had spikes driven through His hands and feet. On the cross we see God in Christ with arms stretched out, hands pinned down, powerless, weak. "He saved others. He is unable to save himself." God still has arms outstretched to embrace us. God is unable to close his hands when we come to him in faith. God's weakness is stronger than human strength because on the cross Christ, in weakness, cried out, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." The weakness of God accomplished a salvation for you and man and the whole world, which the world and you and I for all our vaunted power and strength couldn't accomplish.

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 his demonstration of God's weakness, do I continue to life in my own strength and, so, go on to die? Or do I yield myself to God who became weak for him, so that I might find my strength and wisdom in Christ, the crucified God? 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.