

“Indispensable”
1 Corinthians 12:12-31
Third Sunday after Epiphany

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In his marvelous novel, *Watership Down*, the late author Richard Adams tells the story of a group of rabbits.

And these are no ordinary rabbits.
They are GIFTED rabbits.

Their adventure begins when one of the rabbits,
whose name is Fiver, FORSEES DOOM for the warren
in which the rabbits live.

Fiver cannot explain why he knows that their warren will be destroyed. He just knows it, and so he shares that knowledge with his brother Hazel.

Hazel trusts Fiver’s intuition. So Hazel convinces a handful of other rabbits that the only way they will live is to leave the warren. Turns out, Fiver was right to be scared—their former warren gets destroyed by new construction. But when this small group of rabbits departs, they do not KNOW THIS. They just know that they are now out in the open, searching for a new home, exposed to new dangers.

And they each must use their gifts to survive.
What are the gifts?

- Fiver’s gift is foresight, intuition.
- Hazel’s gift is leadership.

- Bigwig’s gift is his physical strength, his ability to travel longer distances, to fight dangerous enemies.

But there is one rabbit in particular who doesn’t seem to fit the pattern. That rabbit’s name is Pipkin. Pipkin is small. Pipkin is weak. Far from being a ready source of help for his fellow travelers, Pipkin is more of a burden. Slower than the rest, more fearful than the rest...it would have been tempting, VERY TEMPTING, to simply leave Pipkin behind.

And yet the group decides not to do it.

They help take care of Pipkin, even though it would be easier NOT to do so.

At first blush, it simply looks like the kind and considerate thing to do.

But then the rabbits come across a farm, and Bigwig gets caught in a rabbit trap. Bigwig is dying before their eyes, and the only way to free him is by gnawing through the stake that holds the snare.

And which rabbit is it that proves to be the ONLY rabbit capable of fitting in the small, tiny opening where the stake can be gnawed through all the way—the only rabbit of the bunch who can free Bigwig from certain death?

It's Pipkin, of course.

The least desirable member of the group,
the weakest member, turns out to be the most essential member.¹

If I didn't know better, I would say that Richard Adams wrote the opening to his novel while reading the 12th chapter of 1st Corinthians.

Remember what Paul says in our text for today?

“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable...”

Indispensable.

Paul, of course, is making an analogy to the church.

Indispensable...that's the word Paul uses to describe—

not the member of the church who has been around the longest,
not the most active and engaged member of the church,
not the member who gives the most money to the church.

No, Paul says that in the church, the most valuable members are the ones who appear the weakest...

¹ Richard Adams, *Watership Down*, New York: Scribner, 1972.

Why would Paul say this?

That weakness is indispensable for a church?!

That's not the way you and I approach weakness.

We tend to hide our weakness, get embarrassed by our weakness...

I recall when I was getting ready to graduate from seminary, there was a church that offered me a call. It was a good church, with a good senior pastor, and a good job. But it wasn't in a great location.

Kind of the middle of nowhere.

So I thought and I thought, and I finally said no.

But then I graduated from seminary, and I didn't have a job, and I didn't want to go back to live with my parents with a graduate degree in hand.

So I called the church back, and I said yes.

And they said great, but we'd like to talk with you a bit more first.

Make sure we understand why you changed your mind.

So they scheduled a date for the phone call.

I woke up the morning of that phone call, and I knew...it was the wrong decision.

So I called the senior pastor and I said no again.

Seven months later, I was called to serve as an associate pastor at St. Barnabas Presbyterian outside of Dallas...and I was very confident about that call, and to this day I remain very grateful for that call.

It's how I got my start in ministry, it's where I met my wife.

But 20+ years later, I'm still a bit embarrassed by the flip-flop I performed as I was graduating from seminary.

To be indecisive. To waffle.

To make a commitment, and then take it back.

Who among us likes to display such weakness?

I don't know why Paul does it.

I do know this.

I know that Paul seems to have *a thing*...about weakness.

Listen to the way that he describes the Corinthian congregation in chapter 1:

“Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong...”

Paul is telling the Corinthians—you were chosen because you were weak!

Or listen to the way Paul describes himself, when he first showed up in Corinth.

“When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom...”

I came to you in weakness....”

And it's not just this letter.

In 2nd Corinthians, Paul writes:

“If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness...”

Good grief.

What's with all this talk about weakness?

Look, if one of my colleagues asks me about the new church I'm serving in South Carolina, you know what I tell them?

“Oh, it's a wonderful church. A congregation that's very warm, very welcoming...a congregation that gives almost 28% of its operating budget to its mission committee...I've got terrific colleagues there, a great staff...and it's a unique congregation, a growing Presbyterian congregation. Half of it's membership is 40-something-years-old or younger...”

See, it's FUN talking about all of you!
I love discussing the strengths of this church!

Which is why I'm glad that the Apostle Paul is not sitting next you in the pew today. If Paul were here, I'm afraid he would say, "Ben, that's all fine and good about your new church. But I didn't come here today to hear about strength. I came to hear about weakness..."

So why would Paul do it?
Why would Paul put such a premium on weakness?

I don't know, but if you'll allow me to guess, I'd like to take a guess.

Possibility NUMBER ONE:

Maybe, just maybe, Paul talks about weakness today because he knows that it's what all of us hold in common.

Behind all the noise, the one constant in human life is our weakness.

After the death of his wife, C.S. Lewis wrote that God "always knew that my temple was a house of cards. His only way of making me realize the fact was to knock it down."²

C.S. Lewis...the great defender of Christianity
who says his faith crumbled just like that...
it can happen to anyone, right?

Have you ever been present during a Bible study or a Session meeting or you're just with friends from this church,
and in the midst of a conversation,
for reasons we can't explain,
all the pretenses and defenses have come down,

² C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, New York: Bantam, 1976.

and someone is talking about a difficult time in their life—
 and they don't even know how to talk about it,
 but they're talking about it...

Not in an intrusive way, just an honest way, describing a time in their life when they had nothing but prayers and God to see them through.

Have you ever been in a moment like that?
 Those are the times when I'm really glad to be part of a church.

And the reason I'm glad is that there's something in their weakness that speaks to MY weakness, something in their faith that builds up my faith...

Which leads me to POSSIBILITY NUMBER TWO:

Perhaps Paul also preached weakness not just because it's what we hold in common, but because it's what makes us Christian.

To walk with others in their weakness.
 To say to someone in the midst of their grief or their fear...you are not alone.

Have you ever been on the receiving end of this kind of thing?

Some of you are familiar with the writer Frederick Buechner.

"I remember," says Buechner, "an especially dark time in my life. One of my children was sick, and in my anxiety for her I was in my own way as sick as she was."

Buechner says that one day the phone rang.
 It was a friend of his named Lou Patrick.
 Not an especially close friend.

But they knew one another.
 Lou Patrick was, at the time, pastoring a church in Charlotte.

So when Buechner—who was living in Vermont—picked up the phone and heard Lou Patrick’s voice, he assumed that Patrick was calling from his home in Charlotte to find out how he was doing.

No, Lou Patrick said, I’m not in Charlotte.
I’m about 20 minutes away.
Not on business. Just because.

In other words, Lou Patrick had traveled 800 miles, up to Vermont, to call Fred Buechner and let him know that he was there and would he like “an extra friend around for a day or two.”

He didn’t even know if Buechner would be in town!
But as luck would have it, he was in town.
And the two spent time together.

“We just took a couple of walks, had a meal or two together...” Buechner writes. “I don’t remember even spending much time talking about my troubles with him...”

But then Buechner goes on:

“I have never forgotten how he came all that distance just for that...although as far as I can remember we never so much as mentioned the name of Christ, Christ was as much in the air we breathed...as the dappled light of the woods we walked through...”

“‘Just twenty minutes down the road did you say? Good God, you must be crazy!’ And that is just it, of course. We are called to be crazy like that,” Buechner concludes, “...to be the hands and feet and heart of Christ to each other.”³

“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

³ Frederick Buechner, “The Church,” in *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons*, New York: HarperCollins, 2006.

Notice what Paul did NOT write.

Paul didn't write: You—on your good days—are the body of Christ.

He did not write: When you ace your test, or land the job, or win the case, or have kids that make you proud—that's when you're the body of Christ.

He didn't say that.

He said that we're the body of Christ on ANY day.

On days when we fail, no less than days when we succeed.

On days when our world has come crashing down, no less than when we're at the top.

Our weakness, in other words, is not separate from Christ.

It is not the OPPOSITE of Christ.

It is not something we need to eliminate in order to be with Christ.

According to Paul, it is how we know Christ.

Maybe that's it.

Maybe Paul preached weakness,

not just because it's what human life is like,
and not just because it's what Christian life is like.

Maybe Paul preached weakness because that's what God is like.

“God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom,” Paul wrote, “and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.”

Mary Ellen Geist used to be an award-winning journalist, but a number of years ago, she left that life to return home to Michigan, to help her mother.

Her mother was spending her days taking care of Mary Ellen's father, who suffered from Alzheimer's.

Upon her arrival home, Geist's eyes were really opened up, not just to her father's condition, but to the ways in which her mother was sacrificing her life to be a caregiver for Mary Ellen's dad.

At one point, Geist uses the following analogy for her mother. She talks about the father of a friend, an expert hunter, who was out hunting geese one day. He saw a flock [of Canada geese] going over in V formation. He zeroed in on the last large goose in the flock.

The gun went off. It wasn't a clean hit.
He saw the wounded bird begin to lose altitude.
The bird fell slowly, trying to save itself.

Then he saw something he had never seen before.

A bird from the front of the V suddenly pulled out of formation and soared beneath the wounded bird as it fell, cradling it on its wings as it helped to bring the wounded bird back up to the V. The father said he was so stunned he simply put his gun down and watched.

He presumed this was the bird's mate (Canada geese are known to mate for life). He watched as the healthy bird continued to carry the wounded one on its back until it began to be dragged down by the weight.

"He...stood in the woods for some time thinking about a partnership so strong you would jeopardize your own life to save another."⁴

Do you know anything about this kind of partnership?

The kind of relationship in which someone's faithfulness is so strong, they go with you no matter how high you fly, or how far you fall?

Sure you do.
Because you know Christ, and Christ knows you.

⁴ Mary Ellen Geist, *Measure of the Heart: A Father's Alzheimer's, A Daughter's Return*, New York: Springboard Press, 2008.

I think, I think what Paul is saying today is something like this:
In the heart and mind of God, every person in this room
is not just weak...and not just gifted...
everyone here is...indispensable.

That's how God sees us, says Paul.
And as it is with God, let it be so with all of you.

Amen.