

“Weakness and Strength”
2 Corinthians 12:2-10
6th Sunday after Pentecost

July 4, 2021
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

On this 4th of July Sunday, I want to begin with a story about someone who loves this country, but was not born in this country. A few years ago, Abbas Mousa told his story on *The Moth* podcast about why he came to the United States from Iraq.

He lived in Baghdad with his family, but it became too dangerous, so he moved to northern Iraq in 2006, to Kurdistan. After some time, he got a job offer to work for the US military as a translator.

He was there for a year or so.

But after a year of being away from his family for a year, he really missed his family, he missed his mother, so he took a vacation over Christmas to visit his mother and his family back in Baghdad.

One evening he took a 2-mile walk to a nearby restaurant, and after the meal, he decided to take a bus home.

“In Baghdad most buses are...ten-passenger vans,” he says, “and one pulled over to pick me up. The van was empty, so I sat in the front passenger seat...I told [the driver] where I needed to go.

“Once we got to my stop, he didn’t stop.”

“Hey, you missed my stop,” I said, “but it’s okay, you can drop me off here...”

The driver insisted on turning around, but once they turned around—

he FAILED TO STOP AGAIN!

“Where are we going?” Mousa asked.

“You’ll know when we get there,” the driver ominously replied.

Mousa goes on:

“Living in Baghdad, I would hear about kidnappings almost every day in the news, but they never told you what to do if this happened to you.”

“...all I could think was, *Will I see another day?*
Will I see my family again?”

As the driver exited the highway, Mousa saw an Iraqi military checkpoint ahead.

“A voice inside me said, *If you don’t survive this now, you might not survive it at all.*”

So—without thinking, Mousa opened the van door, screamed HELP ME!—and he jumped.

“The next thing I knew, I was on the ground...I don’t remember if I rolled, I don’t remember feeling any pain. I just ran. I ran for my life.”

He got to the checkpoint, he told the guards what had happened.
Long story short, he was safe.
And he left Baghdad the next morning.

In 2009, he received his special immigrant visa to come to the United States.

He concludes:

“Now I am a sergeant in the Army National Guard and belong to an organization that can prepare me to defend my adopted country and do my part as a citizen.”

“In Baghdad I was weak...But in America I am strong.”¹

It makes perfect sense.

He had to get away—run away, if you will, from that kind of insecurity and fear and weakness.

Weakness is nothing that any of us strive for.

You don't have to have survived a kidnapping to know about this. We all know about this. We all prefer strength over weakness.

How many of you are looking forward to the college football season this fall? Who here is a Clemson fan? Who here is a Carolina fan? Who here is a Georgia fan?

And who here REALLY hopes that you will have a weak football team this season?

Never mind football.

Weakness is not what we want. We want...

Our family's health to be strong.

Our country's economy to be strong.

Our church's future to be strong.

Who among us is going to vote in favor of weakness?

So maybe I chose the wrong text for today.

To the Corinthians, Paul writes:

¹ As told by Abbas Mousa on The Moth, [The Moth | The Art and Craft of Storytelling](#). I first read this story in *The Moth Presents Occasional Magic: True Stories About Defying the Impossible*, edited by Catherine Burns, New York: Crown Archetype, 2019.

“...I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses...”

“Therefore I am content with weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ...”

Why would Paul say this?

Why would Paul want to boast of his weakness?

I don't know, but the irony is that I almost always find it encouraging when someone speaks openly, with vulnerability about weakness...

Tom Are, who is the pastor at Village Presbyterian Church in Kansas City, recently reflected on the past 15 months in a sermon, and he told his congregation that one of the most common questions that he's been asked during the pandemic, by their membership, was, “How are things? How are things at the church?”

He said that after some months of answering this question, he finally decided to stop lying:

“I don't know,” he finally started saying to people when they asked. “We haven't been together for 15 months—I don't know how things really are with our church.”²

It's a wonderful answer.

And a fascinating answer.

Because it's an answer that no longer projects **STRENGTH**.

It's an answer that leaves room...for weakness.

² Tom Are, “Trust the Gospel,” Village Presbyterian Church, Kansas City, June 6, 2021.

Is there any weakness that you might be running from in your life right now? What would happen if you stopped running, and made some room, some space, for that weakness in your life right now?

I'm not saying you have to do this.

I'm just asking if you might consider doing this.

In fact, let me present you with a few guesses as to why, perhaps, Paul preached about weakness, and why you may want to make room for weakness, and then you can decide at the end of this sermon whether or not you'll do it.

Reason NUMBER ONE:

It's what human life is really like.

For all that bravado that we put out there,

for all the times when someone asks how we're doing,

and we say we're fine, when things are not fine—

weakness is more the rule than the exception.

I'm reminded of something Raymond Carver once wrote.

Carver died 33 years ago—one of my favorite writers, but not an easy life.

Carver was an alcoholic for much of his life. A failed marriage, he went bankrupt twice, and over the course of the 38th year of his life, he was hospitalized four times for his addiction.

"I was completely out of control," he said in an interview.

"I was dying...plain and simple."

And then...

Miraculously, on June 2, 1977, the drinking stopped. Carver acknowledged the help of Alcoholics Anonymous, but he never found an explanation equal to the fact.

“I guess I wanted to live,” he later said.

For the next ten years, he did more than live.

Carver wrote and he wrote very well.

Then came the cancer.

Then Carver died, at what some said was the height of his powers.

After his death, a poem was published—a poem that described the final decade of his life.

The poem is titled “Gravy”, it goes like this:

“No other word will do.

For that’s what it was. Gravy.

Alive, sober, working,

loving, and being loved by a good woman.

**Eleven years ago he was told he had six months to live
at the rate he was going.**

And he was going nowhere but down.

So he changed his ways somehow. He quit drinking!

And the rest?

After that it was *all* gravy, every minute of it,

up to and including when he was told...

some things that were breaking down

and building up

inside his head.

“Don’t weep for me,”

**he said to his friends. “I’m a lucky man.
I’ve had ten years longer than I or anyone expected.
Pure Gravy. And don’t forget it.”³**

Now why did Carver write that poem?
Not simply because he knew success late in his life.
But because he finally stopped running away from his
WEAKNESS.

In fact, the kind of gratitude that Carver experienced late in his life is, I would argue, the gratitude that comes precisely **BECAUSE** one knows what it’s like to be powerless, and unable to control what you desperately want to control.

Of course, the Apostle Paul didn’t just stop running from his weakness, or simply welcome his weaknesses.

He **BOASTED** about them.

Why?

Perhaps because weakness is what human life is like, yes.
But perhaps also because **it’s what the Christian life is like.**
We’ll call that **REASON NUMBER TWO.**

Weakness isn’t something that Christians avoid at all costs.
Weakness is where the Church makes its home—no matter the
cost.

³ Some of the information quoted and presented here about Raymond Carver is taken from a biographical essay of Raymond Carver by William L. Stull, professor of rhetoric at the University of Hartford. It was originally published in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, which holds the copyright.

Let me get at it like this:

Back when I was in seminary, there was an incident that occurred at the end of my first year. One of the students, same year as me, was working for an elderly lady in town—running errands, mowing her grass...

But on the last Saturday morning of the school year, a front-page article appeared in the local paper:

Seminary student accused of forgery.

Apparently, he had been taking this elderly lady's checkbook, and writing checks. Don't know how he was caught, but he was caught.

I didn't know him well, although my roommate in seminary was one of his best friends. It obviously took the campus by surprise. I thought he was a nice guy, never pictured him for a thief.

What I remember most vividly was how he left.

He cleared out, left campus for a few days, waited until most of the students were gone for the year, and then he quietly came back, loaded his belongings into a truck and slipped away.

You could tell that he was contrite, embarrassed, ashamed.

I recall one or two friends helping him load his stuff into the truck.

I don't remember today, all these years later, whether he quit or whether the seminary expelled him.

I think the seminary expelled him.

It wouldn't be too hard to imagine that discussion:

He's no longer trustworthy.

He needed to be taught about consequences.

If other students are not admitted just because they have low grades, how can we keep a student who has such low standards of behavior?

I would understand the reasoning.

And like I said, I don't remember if the seminary expelled him or if he quit.

But I've always wondered what would have happened if he had wanted to return, and the seminary had wanted him back.

If the seminary had said: We're not going to let you go!

If the seminary had said, "We won't condone what you've done, you'll have to pay the price in court, you'll need to repent and atone. But we won't expel you. We will stand by you. We want you to graduate, and know the power of God's redeeming grace."

What do you think would have happened?

Would the seminary have received bad press?

Would donations have gone down?

The reasons for ending the relationship between this student and this seminary were numerous...but if the seminary had decided they wanted him to come back, if they had decided not to run from this situation of weakness, they would have only needed ONE REASON, in my opinion: our text for today.

As Paul tells the church in Corinth:

"...a thorn was given me in the flesh...Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.'"

It is the central paradox of our faith.
That God's power is made perfect in weakness.

That we find God's grace not by going up, but by going down.
That we experience God's love not by crushing the competition,
but by carrying a cross.

You see, weakness is not just what human life is like, and it's not just what Christian life is like.

Weakness has something to do with what God is like.

Perhaps that's REASON NUMBER THREE, why Paul preached weakness...

That it is the nature and character of God to come to us in vulnerability, experiencing our pain as God's pain...

The late preacher Fred Craddock once put it like this.
How many of you, at one time in your life, were a child?

And how many of you ever fell as a child, and skinned your elbow,
or scraped your knee?

So...the child runs crying to his or her mother.
And the mother picks the child up, and says—in what is the oldest
myth in the world:

“Let me kiss it and make it well.”
(As if mom has magic saliva or something...)

And she picks up the child, kisses the skinned place, holds the child in her lap, and all is well.

Did her kiss make it well?

No, of course not.

It was sitting in the mother's lap.

It was the child, in a moment of weakness, being held by arms that will always love that child.

And the child looks up and sees mother crying.

Mother, why are you crying?

Because you hurt, I hurt, mom says.

You bleed, I bleed.

That does more for that child than all the bandages and medicine in the world.

Dr. Craddock used to say that's not just what good parents are like. He said that's what God is like.⁴

You hurt, I hurt.

You bleed, I bleed.

Is there any weakness that you're running from right now?

Any grief, any hurt, that you're trying to bury right now?

What would happen if you stopped running?

⁴ From Fred Craddock's sermon, "Why the Cross?", in *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2011.

“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”

That’s not just the Lord, talking to Paul, in a mysterious vision long ago.

That’s Christ Jesus...in this room...talking to you.

Amen.