
The Strength of Weakness
Martin Grove United Church
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Based on 2 Corinthians 12:2-10 and Mark 6:1-13

Does anyone here own a truck? And have you ever tried to use your truck to pull something. Perhaps to pull a boat on a trailer or maybe pull a tree stump out of the ground. But either way, if you found that your truck was struggling with the task, at that exact point in time did you yell out and ask for less power? I'm guessing, "no". As you were almost but not quite pulling your boat out of the water at a boat ramp, I imagine you were saying, "I just need a little more power".

Have you ever been camping, or canoeing, and after a hard day, when you were digging through the box that contained the remnants of your food - some of it destroyed by water, some of it squashed flat - did you yell out, "I just need less food".

And in our churches, what's the last time we ran into some sort of issue or problem and we decided our collective lives would go better if we just had fewer people coming to our church or that things would go better if we just had less money to worry about?

Maybe it's just me, but I find that in normal, every-day, conversations, most of the time we complain that we want more of things. More money, more time, more energy, more understanding from other people, more knowledge, more ... just more! Which is why I find our scriptural passage so startling today. Today's passages are a call for us to embrace "less". Not just endure "less", but to actually embrace and welcome "less". And perhaps more strangely, we are to embrace "less" because it will, in the end, bring "more" of the kingdom of God into our own lives.

In Second Corinthians, St. Paul says, "God's power is made perfect in our weakness", so we are invited to be weak. And in the gospel of Mark, Jesus sends his disciples to villages in teams of two, but directs the disciples to take practically nothing with them. They are told to take ... a staff. And don't get too excited here. Jesus doesn't mean a staff that includes a chauffeur, a butler, and a chef. Jesus means a stick of wood.

Not only that, but the disciples are explicitly told to not take any food, or money, with them. What sort of strategy is this? And how are we to understand that call today?

Today, in our churches, I hear a lot of talk about investing in our future, building programs. Building buildings. Finding more and having more and wanting more. I don't think we usually want "less". But what does "less" look like anyway? What might "less" look like? What kind of church would we have if we stopped looking for "more" and fully embraced "less".

[what might it mean to embrace less?]

I used to commute by GO train. One day, while I was going into work on the train, I overheard a person say to another passenger that he was looking for a clarinet. So I said, "excuse me, did you say that you are looking for a clarinet?" And he said, "Yes". And I said, "Are you going to be on this same train tomorrow?" And he said, "Yes". And I walked away. That evening, I rooted around in my basement and found an old clarinet. It seemed to be in working condition, so I took it with me and caught the GO train the next day and found the person and said, "Here you go", and handed him the clarinet and said I hoped it would make more pleasant sounds for him than it had ever done for me. But then I asked, "Why is the clarinet special to you?" What followed was a 20 minute pastoral visit about the other person's long and complicated love life, his search for meaning and connection, and the hard work that life can be.

By giving away a clarinet - that truth be told I hated anyway - by allowing myself to have "less" I fell into meaningful conversation with a complete stranger and fellow traveler on this journey we call life. This story, which is completely true by the way, challenged me to rethink what it is I need to have in order to do ministry. And yes, in this particular case, having a clarinet in my basement was helpful. Perhaps Jesus should have instructed his disciples, "Take no money and no food, but take a collection of musical instruments to give away."

I'm also reminded of the many people I have visited with over the years in jail. For about 6 years, I made weekly visits at the Toronto West Detention Centre. And in

jail, I learned the power of weakness. I was very fortunate to start visiting with inmates after the “good old days” were over. In the old days, chaplains would sometimes give gifts to inmates. Like cigarettes, or offering to write letters to a judge that said, “Deep down, Johnny really is a good person”. Or providing connections with the outside world. But by the time I got into prison ministry, all that was over. Chaplains (at least volunteer chaplains) were not able to give away anything at all. Except our time, our caring, our listening, our Christian love.

And by having nothing physical to give away, visits were focused on important issues like relationships and transformation. I never once had to wonder if an inmate only talked to me because I fed him cigarettes, for example. And I learned that if you have nothing to give but your time and your presence, you just might be giving someone something very valuable that they perhaps have never had before.

I started visiting in jail as part of a “field education” course when I was at seminary. So I had a supervisor with whom I would talk with weekly. And I remember he once asked me what I said at the end of my visits. I told him that most visits ended by my telling the person I would try to see them next week. And I usually did see the person the following week, barring any lockdowns or other realities of life inside a correctional facility. My supervisor responded, “So, you tell people you will come back, and then you do.” I looked at him as if he was crazy. He looked at me as if I was missing the point (which I was) and said, making and then keeping a promise is a huge deal to most of the people I visit with because they really don’t expect that. Just keeping your promise is a real ministry to some people.

Imagine that. That making and keeping a promise - something I assume most of us completely take for granted - can be a form of ministry. Now there’s a ministry that requires no money, no training, no education, nothing but authentic living.

So perhaps that’s one reason that Jesus instructed the disciples to take nothing physical with them; so that they could not give anything away. So that all that the disciples would have to give away would be their time, their caring, their listening, their love. They would not be able to “fix” problems with money, but instead would have to simply offer themselves to others. It’s almost as if Jesus understood that healing comes

from being in authentic relationship with others. And how did that work out? In Mark it says, “They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.” The strategy worked.

God's power is made perfect in our weakness. Amazing words. Incredible words. Wonderful words. The only question, really, is ... how on earth can we live up to those words? Or how can we NOT live up to those words if we actually try? They don't require money or a larger congregation, or more energy. Surely we have all the weakness we need, don't we? Perhaps we just need to embrace it.

One modern person whose whole ministry was based on weakness was Jean Vanier. His approach to Christian living was to live in community with mentally challenged people. And by living that way, he embraced - actually, he lived - the life of Jesus. He spent many years at the L'arche community in Richmond hill, just up the road from where I live. In Vanier's own words: “I am struck by how sharing our weakness and difficulties is more nourishing to others than sharing our qualities and successes.”

But Vanier's vision surpassed that. Vanier said, “In the end, the most important thing is not to do things for people who are poor and in distress, but to enter into relationship with them, to be with them and help them find confidence in themselves and discover their own gifts. ... The promise of Jesus is to help us discover that the poor are a source of life and not just objects of our charity.”

We are not invited to become weak in order to help others. We are invited to become weak, in fact, to help ourselves. To help ourselves embrace our own humanity at its most profound and meaningful levels. Isn't that what we imagine when we say that “Jesus was fully human”?

Intentional weakness is indeed a strength. Intentional weakness is something we can all choose to do. Embrace your own weakness so that you - like Jesus - can become fully human. The kingdom of God is here and is yet coming. But the kingdom of God does not come in strength, it comes in weakness.

God is still speaking. Keep listening. Keep acting. Keep loving.

Amen.