

“Power in Weakness”

Neil Engle
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First Christian Church
115 Courthouse Plaza
Manhattan, Kansas 66502

When I served as Associate Pastor in Sheridan, Wyoming, 20 plus years ago, I spent a lot of time with the youth group, in much the same way Stephanie does with the youth of our congregation. At our lock-ins – our overnight events – we’d watch movies – this was just when movies were being released on tape. One of the videos we’d regularly rent was *Young Frankenstein*. In fact, it sorta became “our” movie. I thought about that movie recently when I heard that Peter Boyle had died. Boyle played the monster brought to life by Dr. Frankenstein – or Dr. Frank-in-steen as Gene Wilder would say. The scene where Wilder and Boyle sing and dance to “Putting on the Ritz” never fails to make me laugh. But there is an earlier scene in which Boyle, as the monster, visits a blind man, played by Gene Hackman. The man pours the monster a drink and they prepares to share a toast. Boyle extends his arm, a cup in hand. His host smashes his own cup into the monster’s mug, shattering it. Boyle just rolls his eyes.

Ever have something like that happen? You used too much force – you didn’t know your own strength – and you ended up with a broken piece in your hand or you damaged whatever you were working on? I’ve had that happen several times. I remember getting a set of walkie talkies for Christmas when I was a kid. I hadn’t had them two days before I tried to put down the long antenna by pressing down at the very top. Well, of course, it snapped – leaving me with one broken walkie talkie and one useless companion unit. I recall having a watch which had to be wound and I wound it too tight and it wouldn’t run at all. And then there was the time I was trying to replace the seat on a bathroom fixture and thought I could use a hammer to dislodge the bolts. That use of excessive force resulted in me having to buy a new toilet.

Sometimes strength is not our friend. Sometimes power or strength can get in our way and be counterproductive. That’s true in our lives – it’s also true in the witness of scripture. According to the Bible, sometimes we are better served by restraint – by vulnerability, by powerlessness. Even weakness can be an asset.

That was certainly the case for Mary, the mother of Jesus. After all, she was not a person of power – she was not a princess or a first lady. She was a small town girl who otherwise would have lived and died in obscurity. Mary did not lead a lifestyle of the rich and famous. She was not a pampered wealthy woman pretending to live “a simple life.” She didn’t go out clubbing with her girlfriends or duel with the paparazzi. Mary certainly wasn’t a super model or a powerful television personality or a selfless humanitarian. Even though the church has bestowed honor upon Mary throughout Christian history; even though she has no rival among the disciples, or other New Testament characters, or the rulers and prophets of the Hebrew people, Mary represents ordinary people. She was just plain folk, without a claim to her 15 minutes of fame. She reveals the willingness, the inclination of God to use the weak and powerless in executing divine plans. God’s choice of the lowly and the weak echoes through Luke’s story of the nativity. The Magnificat – that great song of Mary – contrasts the proud, mighty, and wealthy with the humble, hungry, and poor.

The angels announce the birth of Jesus not to religious leaders in the temple or to political leaders in a palace, but to shepherds out in the field. Even the place of the birth lacks prominence. Bethlehem was a one-stop-light town out in the sticks that in no way compared with traffic congested Jerusalem. At nearly every point in the nativity, God chooses to use not the strong and exalted, but the weak and lowly. Strength sometimes gets in God’s way. According to Matthew, when Jesus was born, King Herod felt the strength of his throne. He considered any talk of an “anointed one” a threat to his power. He had no room for the arrival of Jesus. During Jesus’ ministry, many religious authorities depended on the strength of their position and prestige. They enjoyed their status and rejected the radical elements of Jesus’ proclamation that called them into question.

Does that still happen? Does strength still get in God’s way? What about those times when we become all too comfortable in worship; when we think we have God figured out, when we know that God certainly could not speak to us in any way other than the manner in which we are accustomed to worship? We’re strong when it comes to our preferences and styles, ignoring the fact that God just may want to do a new thing with us or for us.

Or how about our approach to Scripture? Many of us are so strong in our belief about what the Bible says, that we read it only to confirm what we think we already know. As one scholar suggests:

“When we know what Scripture says about something even before we open the book, we might as well leave it closed. Scripture has a marvelous capacity to meet us anew again and again, but its message becomes tired and worn when we come to it with the strength of our knowledge rather than with the need of fresh revelation from God”

How about our strength in evaluating others? Anyone ever tell you that you’re a good judge of character? Well, perhaps you are, but how would you have judged the character of Moses the murderer, and David the womanizer, and Peter the “deny-er.” And have you ever been proven wrong in your judgement of others? I certainly have.

Strength can get in the way sometimes. It can shatter us and leave us just as broken as the Frankenstein monster’s cup. Strength can get in God’s way. God frequently chooses to come to the weak, like Mary, because weakness makes room for God. When Jesus announces the focus of His ministry in Luke, He declares that God has sent Him to the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed. God sent Him to the weak. In all four gospels, those who receive the most benefit from Jesus are those who admit or discover the greatest need of Him. Weakness makes room for God.

Jesus tells a story about the Pharisee and tax collector. The Pharisee, standing on the strength of his tithes and fasts, prays, “God, I think you that I am not like others, unjust people or even like this tax collector.” The tax collector, on the other hand, acknowledges his weakness – his need for forgiveness, and prays, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” God can’t break through the heart of the Pharisee because his strength gets in the way, but the weakness of the tax collector makes room for God to encounter Him in prayer.

Sometimes those who feel the least comfortable and least equipped often depend the most on God. God uses others, too, but in our experience doesn’t God seem most at work in those whose humility and longing make room?

In 1985, when I was serving the church in Wyoming, I experienced some conflict with the pastor with whom I was working. Not really knowing how to creatively deal with the anger I was feeling, I turned it inward. I began having problems with sleeping. I lost weight, I would get sick to my stomach on Sunday morning – especially at the beginning of worship. After medical tests ruled out a physical problem, I was diagnosed as being depressed. I was stunned. Me? Depressed? No way. I’m too good to be depressed. You see. At that time, I viewed depression as a moral failing – and for me to admit that I was suffering from depression meant that I had somehow failed as a person. After all, I naively believed that the only people who were depressed were people who didn’t have their act together, and that wasn’t me. Besides I couldn’t bear the thought of having the congregation know that there was something wrong with me. I was one of their pastors, and the last thing they needed was a weak and vulnerable leader. I finally accepted the fact that I was broken, that I couldn’t just “buck up” and be happy, that I was powerless to fix myself. Through a combination of counseling and medication I became healthy again.

While I would not wish depression on anyone, the six months I spent with that mental illness was very instructive for me. When my world fell apart, when I could find no joy in the everyday activities of life, I was driven deeper into the arms of God. My faith was about the only thing I had to hold onto. It was a tremendous reminder of my humanity, my vulnerability, and my absolute and utter dependence upon God. Depression also helped me grow in humility, and I think and hope I’m a better pastor for having had the experience. I believe God worked in and through my weakness. Weakness made room for God. Maybe you’ve had a similar experience, when in your weakness you turned to God for help, or maybe sought help from another person. Many of us find that when we need help on our journey of faith, that help is more likely to come, not from a brash person with all the answers, but from someone who bows beneath the unanswerability of the questions.

God finds room in the humility and weakness to comfort, encourage, and counsel. Whose support do we want the most: those eager to stand and give advice, or those on their knees praying for the guidance God alone can provide? It is those of us who hunger whom God feeds, the lowly whom God will uplift, the weak whom God will make stronger. Emmanuel comes to us. Receiving Him depends more on our willingness and longing than on our ability. The areas of our lives in which we feel the least prepared to receive Emmanuel may reveal the very places He will offer the most growth and use us the most completely. Emmanuel comes.

God comes to be with us in the power of Jesus Christ. No one is too weak to receive Him. The proud and the mighty have no need and thus no room for Him. Let us admit our need, let us embrace our weaknesses, whatever they may be, so that we may even at this late date, make room for Emmanuel.

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