

## **The Strength We Can Find In Weakness**

**A Message by James R. Newby**

**Text: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10**

**In his book, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, Peter Gomes tells of going to England where he worshipped at the church in Windsor where the royal family worships. On this occasion following the service, Gomes met the Queen Mother, who at the time was 102 years old. She commented to Peter on what a fine sermon the pastor gave, and then she said, with a twinkle in her eye, “I do like a bit of good news on Sunday, don’t you?”**

**I think that all of us are looking for a bit of good news this First Day. But what is the *good news* about what I just read from Second Corinthians concerning Paul’s “thorn in the flesh,” and weakness? We are more likely to see weakness as bad news. For the most part, we try to keep our weaknesses under wraps. We dismiss them, minimize them, and try to make them go away.**

**Weakness, however, is a part of who we are as human beings. And we are all too familiar with our weaknesses,...*Fear, selfishness, judgmentalism, self-righteousness, low self-esteem*, and so on...We may even think that the world revolves around ME. I have a friend who says, “Jim, I am tired of talking about me. Let’s talk about you. What do you think of me?!?” Ego can get in the way, and pride can turn our strengths into arrogance. This is true for us as individuals, and it is true for us as a nation.**

**In the second stanza of the song, “America, the Beautiful,” there is the line, “America, America, God mend thine every flaw, confirm thy soul in self-control, Thy liberty in law!”**

***God, mend thine every flaw...* It is a prayer...We have flaws that need to be mended. If the last few years have taught us anything, they have exposed an economic system that is tilted toward the wealthy, while the middle and lower classes get further and further behind. We have witnessed weaknesses in our health care system, in our ways of governing, in our unjust immigration system, as well**

**as in our ability to live together in community. We know about flaws and about weakness.**

**In the scripture reading this morning, Paul says, “I boast of my weakness.” Here he is giving us a crucial insight into faith. We know that Paul had plenty of ego strength, but he says that, “To keep me from being too elated, a thorn in the flesh was given to me.” Was it depression, headaches, epilepsy? We don't know. Whatever his ailment, it lingered with him, and Paul, a believer in intercessory prayer, prayed over and over again for God to take it away. Instead, Paul was given the strength to bear his pain... “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” It is a paradox of faith. “When I am weak, then I am strong.” Whatever limitation that Paul faced, he learned, over time, to see his weakness as a pathway to spiritual growth.**

**Jesus was always hanging out with what Rome believed were expendable people—those who were hurting and who were oppressed, the most vulnerable of his time. His mission was to**

invite weak and wounded people to enter the Kingdom of God, the beloved community of love, forgiveness, justice and restored life.

But his starting point was weakness. *He focused first on people who are weak.* He was in the business of transforming weakness into strength. The question for each of us, especially during this time when all of our Quaker values are in peril, is whether we will become vulnerable enough to allow God to help us turn our weakness into strength.

In our nation, and in every nation, I believe that God's love is in the business of *mending flaws*. I believe that God is in the business of turning our personal defeats into victories, our disappointments into hope. The first step is to trust that the Light of God will help us deepen our weakness until that weakness becomes a path to strength. When this occurs, then impossible things can happen. By God's grace, our weakness can become a healing force, a conduit to help make other wounded people whole.

**I first met Henri Nouwen, the author of *The Wounded Healer*, at Pendle Hill the Quaker retreat center near Philadelphia. Through the years his books have been, for me, constant spiritual companions. One of the most profound things he ever wrote is this: "Nobody escapes being wounded. We are all wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main question is not, 'How can we hide our wounds?,' believing that our wounds are embarrassing, but 'How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?' When our wounds cease to be a source of shame and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers."**

**Weaknesses and becoming wounded are not to be desired; they cause terrible pain. Our wounds, however, can make our hearts softer, more aware of the pain of others. If our wounds do not turn into bitterness, they can become a place where God works to bring about tenderness and kindness, and move us to compassion...As a nation and as a world that is struggling with all of the new realities**

**that are being thrust upon us, we really need to be more tender, more kind and more compassionate toward one another. Life is an accumulation of wounds. Healing our wounds with one another is a continuous process of growing in our ability to allow love into our injured hearts. As a result, we become wounded healers. And if there was ever a time when we needed wounded healers, it is now.**

**I close with a memory from a few years ago when Elizabeth and I attended a Taft Lecture at the Cintas Center on the campus of Xavier University. The speaker was William Barber, an African-American minister from North Carolina, and the Executive Director of the Poor Peoples Campaign. He shared a brief overview of Scripture, pointing out the number of times the Prophets and Jesus in his teaching call attention to the poor and vulnerable members of society, and how societies, through the centuries have treated them. His lecture was really like a tent revival meeting, where he pointed to the expendables of our society and their leadership role in the spiritual renewal that our society so desperately needs. He talked**

**about how such expendables are the hope of our civilization, rejecting the divisiveness that so many of today's political leaders have espoused. We sang together what is the Poor People's Campaign's rallying cry: "Someone is hurting my brother, my sister, my child, and it has gone on far too long. We are not going to be silent anymore." At the end of his lecture, William Barber invited gay persons, transgender persons, African Americans, Native Americans, Latinas and Latinos, Jews, Muslims and Asian Americans, as well as those who are physically and mentally challenged, to come forward and stand together. And as we continued to applaud, Barber closed his remarks, saying, "These are the ones who have known rejection and exclusion, and with whom Jesus stood. These are the ones who will renew our society...Not the Scribes, not the Pharisees, not the Romans, but those who our society has deemed expendable.**