

May 30, 2010 Trinity Sunday
Romans 5: 1-5, 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

The Strength of Weakness

I once knew a little girl who believed that she could do anything. She was at least as strong as her brothers and all of the other boys in the neighborhood. She could beat them at arm-wrestling and at all the other sports and she could take a tumble without missing a beat. She could run faster and climb higher and keep going long after all the other kids had collapsed from exhaustion.

She hadn't needed anyone's help to do anything since she was very, very young. Her mother told the story of her first words--they were "I do it!"

She was very proud of herself. She bragged about her strength and her endurance and her stamina.

Have you ever met a girl like that??

And then one day, when she was about fourteen, she stopped bragging about all that.

She began to act weaker than she was. She pretended that she could no longer run as fast. She stopped arm wrestling the boys and started asking them to help her carry her books.

She stopped trying to beat other kids, especially the boys, at everything and started letting other people do things for her.

This began as a way of getting the boys to think of her in a different way, but it ended up changing the way she thought about herself.

She didn't like acting like she was weak and needed help, but she didn't want the boys to think that she only wanted to beat them at everything. She wanted them to think of having a different kind of relationship with her.

And as she began to let other people do things for her, she found out that it was nice to just talk to them, instead of always trying to prove she was stronger, better, faster.

For the first time she began to see other people as friends and not competitors.

For the first time, she began to share her feelings and thoughts, her fears, her hopes and dreams.

For the first time, she understood that she was more than just her strengths. She had weaknesses, too. And needs.

She needed friendship and love and caring and someone to talk to about her questions about the future.

When she learned how to ask for help even though she didn't need it, she found that she could ask for help when she really did need it. She found out that it was okay to admit weakness and need.

She developed close friendships with a handful of other kids, including a couple of girls---she had never had much use for girls before, and they had mostly been afraid of her.

And she approached adulthood as a happier, more open person.

While most of us do not take trying to be such a strong, independent person to this extreme, all of us take a certain amount of pride in standing on our own two feet, being able to meet life's challenges on our own terms, being able to handle whatever might come our way. We want to be able to keep up with or be better than other people as far as our education, our jobs, providing for our families, getting through the tough times.

You know, "when the going gets tough, the tough get going!" No one says, "when the going gets tough, curl up in the corner and hide."

Even though sometimes that's exactly what we might feel like doing, we would never admit to that. We don't like to be weak. We don't want to be dependent or inadequate. Giving up doesn't seem like an option.

And so we muddle through whatever challenges, whatever struggles we face, trying to prove how tough we are, that we're up for it, no matter what it is. And we too often hesitate to ask for help.

When Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, he was also addressing this need to feel strong and tough, to appear to others to be completely competent and adequate.

The early Christians, after all, faced enormous challenges. They faced persecution from both the Roman government and the Jewish religious establishment. This suffering came in many forms, including ostracism from families, loss of friends, imprisonment, and even death.

It was easy to want to appear strong, even justifying that by saying they needed to be good examples, model leaders, and a desire to be like Jesus, who faced death so bravely.

I'm not saying that those early Christians were a bunch of wimps who had a machismo problem.

I'm just saying that it's human nature to want to face our struggles, our enemies, our suffering, with our "game face" on, looking strong and tough and not wanting to look afraid or cowardly.

But there is one thing those early Christians knew that we sometimes forget----

We can rely on God for grace to get us through whatever it is that we face.

Paul tells us that by faith we entered "into this grace by which we stand"----the grace of God! This grace is ours because of Jesus Christ's presence in our lives. It is only by this grace that we, who are sinners, can even stand in the presence of the living God.

In the Old Testament no one could see God and live. Even the great leaders like Moses and Elijah had to hide in a crevice, a cleft, in a rock, while God passed by.

Jesus Christ changed that. Because he was God incarnate, God in the flesh, it was possible for ordinary people, people who were sinners, who were outcast by society, who were rejected by others, to see God---and not only to SEE him, but to talk to him, listen to him, touch and be touched by him.

God's grace was made available to all of us in the person of Jesus Christ. God's grace, Paul tells us----the grace in which we stand. We are able to stand in the presence of God by the grace of God.

Without that grace, we cannot even stand.

Without that grace we can do NOTHING! God offers us grace before we ask for it. But we do have to accept that gift that God offers. We need to respond. We respond by humbly admitting that we NEED God's grace.

We have to stop being strong and independent and admit our reliance on God.

I learned the importance of being able to admit weakness when I was teaching kids with severe, multiple disabilities. On their own, these children were very limited in what they could do.

Many could not speak to ask for help, but some of them could move away to reject help. Others could not move away but would lash out or yell to refuse to be helped.

But most of them allowed people to help them.

They needed help to sit up so we positioned them in special chairs. They needed help to eat, so we strapped special spoons to their hands because they couldn't hold the spoons by themselves. They needed help to walk, so we helped them get into special walkers or into wheelchairs.

They needed help to stand, so we lifted them into special equipment called prone standers.

They needed help to stand-----and suddenly I am back to "the grace by which we stand." These children could not even stand by themselves.

And the truth is, neither can we.

It is only by the grace of God that we stand.

I am not speaking literally here. Of course for most of us our bodies are strong enough for us to get into a standing position.

For some of us, we need a little help, so we use walkers or wheelchairs, but that doesn't mean that God no longer gives us the gift of his grace.

The standing that we cannot do by ourselves is more of a metaphor.

We cannot do what God calls us to do, we cannot be the people that God created us to be, we cannot be the light of the world or the salt of the earth

Without the gift of God's grace!

And grace works through all of our struggles, all of our suffering, all of our sorrows and challenges to develop our endurance, as some translations say, or patience, as others put it.

All suffering does not result in endurance and patience, only the suffering that causes us to turn to God with humble hearts, asking for help and grace and mercy.

Without God, suffering can lead to depression, despair, and hopelessness. But when we turn to God for help, suffering leads to endurance and patience, which then builds character.

The word for character can also be translated as “approvedness.” It means we have passed a time that tested our faith and our trust in God. Proven character. The kind of strength which comes from relying on a higher power---from depending on the grace of God.

This character, then, produces hope. Why? Because we know we have come through hard times before, and we know we can do it again by doing the same thing----that is, by relying on God.

By relying on God and not on our own strength. When we allow God's love to fill our hearts there is no room in us for despair or discouragement, but only room for hope!

By the power of the Holy Spirit, we are set free from hopelessness and despair. We no longer fear the future because we know that the grace of God is ours and the Holy Spirit will always be with us.

In his second letter to the Corinthians that Maxine read this morning, Paul tells us that the only things he brags about are his weaknesses, not his strengths. This is because in his weakness, he turns to God, and only by turning to God is he able to fulfill his calling as an apostle of Christ. He writes that God said to him that, "My grace is sufficient for you. When you are weak, my power is made perfect in you."

When we don't have the power to do something on our own, we turn to God who will give us grace and power. Paul continues on, saying, "For this reason I am happy when I have weaknesses, insults, hard times, sufferings, and all kinds of troubles for Christ. Because when I am weak, then I am truly strong."

Truly strong because he is relying on the source of all strength, the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Today is Trinity Sunday, and I guess I could have been expounding on the nature of the Trinity, the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And in a way I have been.

Through Jesus Christ, God-with-us, God incarnate, we are given the gift of the grace of God. It is through Christ's redeeming power that we are allowed to stand in the presence of God, allowed to pray for ourselves and for others, and given the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Our Creator has given us the gift of salvation through Christ, and together the Creator and the Christ have given us the gift of the Comforter, the Holy Spirit.

To receive these gifts from God we need to admit our weaknesses and acknowledge that we need God's help to do any of the things that we are called to do.

We need grace to stand and be preachers, teachers, peacemakers, care-givers, hospitality-providers, administrators, helpers, and all of the other things that we are called to be.

Remember the strong little girl who eventually learned to ask for help? She changed from a child who thought she should and could do everything herself into a teenager who found friendship and happiness by allowing others to help her.

How many of us miss out on deeper happiness and more fulfilling relationships because we are unwilling to admit our weaknesses and ask for help?

How many of us are fine with helping others but push others away when they want to help us?

How many of us think we have to do everything ourselves to prove something, or because we don't want to impose on others, or bother anyone with our problems?

How many of us are unwilling to admit our need for the grace of God to help us stand?

When we can admit that we are weak, we find that our true, our only strength lies in the power of the living God! When we can allow others to help us in the name of God, in the power of the Holy Spirit, as the body of the risen Christ, we find open, honest, mutual relationships, not only with each other, but with God!

Jesus said, "I no longer call you disciples, but friends."

To be a friend of Christ----what a gift! What a blessing! But it will only happen when we admit our weakness.

That strong little girl grew up to be a strong, amazing woman. But she couldn't have done it without the help and love of her friends, and she couldn't have made those friends without the grace of God, the grace by which she stands, and by which she is becoming the person that God created her to be.

As it is for her, may it be for us.

Let us pray----

God of grace, be with us in all of our days and all of our nights. Be with us when we are weak, and help us to stand. Be with us when we suffer and help us to learn to endure. Keep our hope in you alive and strong. Help us to accept the help we need graciously and without shame. We remember that even Jesus needed help to carry the cross!

Open our ears to hear the words of your calling and open our minds to understand your purpose for our lives. Open our eyes to see the body of Christ ready and willing to help us. Open our mouths to ask for that help. Teach us to rely only on you and not on our own small strength.

Lead us, heal us, transform us, by the power of the Holy Spirit and in the name of your son, Jesus, who is the Christ.

Amen.