

1 Sermon, February 24, 2013

Texts: Matthew 5:11-12, Matthew 10:5-10

Title: "Why Christianity is Odd: Weakness is Strength"

Today's sermon begins a series on "Why Christianity is Odd."

It may seem odd just to have a sermon series with that title.

But some things about Christian faith don't seem to make sense on the surface. The apostle Paul pointed this out, when he said that the cross didn't make sense.

Why should the messiah have to die? Why should the messiah, with the power of God behind him, die on a cross. Shouldn't the messiah shake things up for the better? Shouldn't the messiah come on strong and change the world? Dying on a cross, on the first-century version of an electric chair, just didn't make sense.

That's what today's sermon is about. God uses our weakness more than God uses our strength. God used the weakness of the cross to build a faith that has lasted two millennia.

There's a funny little poem written by a British writer some 70 years ago. It runs like this:

How odd of God to choose the Jews.

In fact, it doesn't make sense. Why would God choose the Jews? There were many ancient peoples who were much greater than that little tribe of hill people in the backwater of Palestine. The Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Persians all had great empires in the time of the Old Testament. They were the ones that were great and powerful.

But God chose to use a weak little tribal society in Palestine.

There's a response to that little rhyme:

How strange of man to change the plan.

Yes, humanity keeps trying to change God's plans. We keep trying to rely on our own strength. We keep wanting to be great in our own right.

I am an example of God's power using my weakness. I would be a very different person if I could have done sports in school. But I was weak. I was short, skinny and asthmatic. I couldn't run any distance before I started wheezing. I tried out for volleyball, but dropped out during the tryouts because they had us run and run.

2 Sermon, February 24, 2013

It turns out that my weaknesses gave me sensitivity to the weaknesses of others. My weaknesses kept me from being puffed up with pride.

And when others responded to my weakness with kindness and treatments it gave me hope.

When I was little, I had a hard time falling asleep. But in my weakness, I turned to prayer, and it relaxed me and gave me confidence, and I fell asleep.

My weaknesses gave me the chance to trust in God.

I'd like to tell you a bit of the story of Debi Godsey, a woman who was written up in the Milwaukee Journal ten years ago, because she gave one of her kidneys away to a woman she wasn't related to.

Debi Godsey had had a terrible time growing up. She was molested in childhood, and grew up a drug addict and a prostitute. In 1990, after six years of marriage, she gave her second husband an ultimatum: me or alcohol. Jim Godsey chose alcohol.

Debi Godsey got to the point where she had set a date to shoot her husband and then drive her motorcycle into the path on an oncoming semi.

But then she and Jim attended a FamilyLife Marriage Conference in a hotel in Brookfield and something changed. The leaders talked about committing their lives and marriages to God. And Debi and Jim took it seriously. Debi asked Jim to forgive her. Jim asked Debi to forgive him. They cried together. They haven't looked back since.

Soon after, Debi started to take homeless people into their home. Some turned their lives around. Some didn't. There would often be people sleeping on their living room floor.

One of those homeless people was Monique Parks, 22 years old with three children. Monique brought her children to Debi's home. Monique would try to correct her children's behavior with yelling and hitting. But Debi showed her a different, more patient way. Debi gave Monique a heavy dose of religion, telling her to repent.

Monique left for a while, but then came back. Monique started to give her children things she never had, like picture albums of their childhood. Like consistency and hope.

3 Sermon, February 24, 2013

But Monique had kidney disease. She was on dialysis several times a week, and needed a kidney transplant. None of her relatives were both compatible and willing to give her a kidney.

Debi felt called to give Monique one of her kidneys. But there were two problems. First, how likely would it be that her kidney would be compatible. Second, Debi's kidneys had had problems, too.

So Debi prayed. She asked God to make this work. Her kidneys were a match. And when she went to the hospital to get checked out, her kidneys were found to have been healed. They were in perfect health.

Now, ten years later, Debi is still doing her ministry, and now it has a name, "Kidz in the Hood."

Now I want to ask you. Do you think Debi Godsey's ministry comes out of strength, or out of weakness?

When she began to take in homeless people, do you think she was wealthy? No, she and Jim were barely scraping by. Does she do her ministry with a degree in social work? No. Does she have corporate or foundation funding? No.

God uses Debi's weakness to do amazing things.

And then there's Jesus' sending of the twelve – the second gospel reading for today. Jesus sent out his closest followers with no gold, or silver, or copper in their belts, no bag for their journey, not even a change of clothing or a walking stick.

Why did Jesus do that?

What was the point?

Wouldn't it have been better for the disciples to have a few more resources to draw on?

But, no, Jesus wanted them to go out in weakness, without artificial crutches, without anything that would keep them from being dependent upon God.

And what did they do? Jesus told them to "proclaim the good news, heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons.

All that, with so few resources.

So it is with you, too. God uses your vulnerability, your weakness, your humility to do what you couldn't even imagine. You just need to

4 Sermon, February 24, 2013

trust that God is sufficient for your needs — And not only your needs, but the needs of the world. Then you act out of that understanding.

The religious group known as the Shakers has almost died out now, because they don't marry or have children. They used to adopt many local children near their communities, but now there are other options for families that can't afford to feed their children.

The Shakers were a vibrant religious group that sang and danced joyously. They had prosperous farms and furniture workshops. They raised children with love.

And they did it according to their founder's visions, by four basic tenets. First, they must live communally. Second, they must be celibate. Third, they must regularly confess their sins. And fourth, they must separate themselves from the outside world.

To put it simply, they practiced weakness. They lived communally, with a great deal of equality, not elevating some above others. There was no reason to be ambitious for rank or position.

Their celibacy meant that they did not invest pride in their own children above the children of others.

Their regular confession of sin kept them humble, acknowledging their failings and weaknesses.

And their separation from the outside world kept out the conceit of the newest and best gadgets and fashions.

The Shaker communities were revolutionary because they offered both spiritual and physical equality, an equality that also extended to non-Christians and individuals of different races who joined the communities. Men and women were fundamentally equal, although they had separate spheres of activities.

Out of their individual weakness, they had a great deal of communal strength.

The apostle Paul wrote,

"God said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong." 2 Corinthians 12:9, 10, NRSV.

No, to the world, this idea of God using weaknesses is just odd. It makes very little sense.

5 Sermon, February 24, 2013

But, thanks be to God! God can use us when we seem least able.
Amen.

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."
Matthew 5:11, 12, NRSV.

"These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food." Matthew 10:5-10, NRSV.