

Last week I spoke about the cross, as a powerful, but paradoxical symbol. Paradoxical because on the one hand, as our opening hymn says, it “glows” with peace and joy... while on the other hand, the cross speaks of pain, suffering, and tragic death. The hymn states the paradox of the cross well: “Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure, by the cross are sanctified.” Somehow both the good and the bad “belong” in our journey of life. We might not appreciate what is good in life if life were just “easy street.” We know the butterfly would never be able to fly if it were not for the struggle to get out of the cocoon!

One of the things I mentioned last week was that we need images of BOTH the empty cross and the cross with Jesus on it. It seems that our Catholic brothers and sisters emphasize the suffering Jesus, while Protestants have more empty crosses (symbolizing more the victorious and risen Christ). Each needs to learn from the other, not say the other is wrong. While I loved the joyful singing of the Pentecostal Church when I was active in that partnership, I was dismayed that some of their pastors sort of made fun of the Catholics. One pastor compared the funeral processions: “When *Catholics* go down the street in a funeral procession, it is so so sad, heads down, depressed. When *we* go down the street, we are singing songs with trumpets; *we* sing of the victory in Christ!” Neither way is right nor wrong; sorrow and tears are an important part of healing, while faith in a heavenly destination is good for comfort and courage.

Paul said something very interesting in his letter to the Corinthian church: “The *weakness* of God is stronger than our strength... so we preach Christ *crucified*.” No one expected these kinds of words about a Messiah. As with Jesus’ teachings, Paul’s teachings were countercultural. Paul also said, I will even *boast* of my weaknesses... so that the power of God may be made known.

Can we see truth in what Paul is saying? I think so! We love to hear “rags to riches” stories. People start out life weak or poor or disadvantaged, and through hard work (and some help along the way), wind up happier or at least more comfortable. I say “help along the way,” because I believe that whatever our situation of birth, there are hardships that, if we are to overcome, we need help and community. So I come to

the idea of vulnerability; literally it means “able to be wounded.” It means things like honesty about our limits, our weak areas, our wounds, *and* being able to ask for help. The paradox and miracle is that because of the honesty, help can come, and community support can make us stronger. God's strength is found in community, in love, in everyone helping everyone else, according to both our weaknesses and our gifts.

Speaking of vulnerability, I always loved sermons when preachers disclosed some personal challenge or weakness, something that took courage to face. Preachers are always looking for illustrations or stories, and sometimes stories come from their own lives. This is easier to do as a guest speaker, for the listeners will not have heard the story before. For someone preaching every Sunday, we surely repeat ourselves from time to time.

So forgive the probable repetition, but one relevant thing I can share from my own life (and I'm not going to follow Paul to the max and boast of many weaknesses!)... is that in my youth I was quite a stutterer! Strange weakness to have... probably something to do with stress, or nervous system being too sensitive. Maybe not all that weak... since a quick internet search shows people, even famous people, that overcame it or lived with it: Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, Nicole Kidman, Moses, President Biden, Winston Churchill, King George IV (movie: *The King's Speech*) James Earl Jones (the voice behind *Lion King* and *Darth Vader*), Bruce Willis. When I was in about 4th grade, I remember one kid making fun of me, and the whole class laughing, and me thinking I'm never raising my hand again! In Junior High, I remember going to a speech therapist and getting homework that was “Call about 10 people in the yellow pages, and ask a question real *slow-ly*.” (Most bus-i-nes-ses huuung uup ohn me!). I remember in High School winning a speech-writing contest for Memorial Day; I must have ignored the fact that I then had to speak it publicly on the town common! In High School my grades snuck up on me... they were too darn good, so I was informed in Spring of my senior year that I would be valedictorian... oops, another public speech! I must have practiced it 100 times! I remember teaching Spanish, I couldn't get out the word for homework! (I should have let the class have no homework every day!) But

instead I struggled with the word... “La Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-rea para mañana es....” So, in God’s strange paradoxical way, what do you do with someone like this? You call the guy to be a preacher! I remember in seminary (we’re talking close to age 30 now!) dreading the class called “Speech!” I dreaded having to read a poem in front of the class. I’m sure I stuttered a few times, but I did finish the poem.

Why am I sharing all this? Just as one illustration of Paul’s conviction that “when I am weak, then I am strong.” That we can tell of our weaknesses, and the journey of overcoming (maybe little by little), with the grace, love, courage, strength of God! That our God has put in each of us the seeds of wholeness, the potential for healing and transformation! We preach Christ crucified, a Christ who was vulnerable to wounding from the world, but who lived with persecution and wounds, even unto his death, yet he had the spirit of overcoming!

I want to share more about a mentor of mine, whose lovely Lenten stole I am wearing. Dear Joe, is now in a unit for dementia or Alzheimer’s. His short term memory is very compromised; it would be near impossible to live independently. HOWEVER...probably due to all the years of thinking about and practicing the presence of God, when I visited him recently, both our spirits were lifted in a joyous way. Yes, he is more limited in his abilities, but somehow, he has adapted, and found love and joy in his new environment. For example... are some of you familiar with Coloring Books for Seniors? My first encounter with them gave me thoughts like: is this what life comes to? Like a kindergartener, we get to color pictures? Well, Joe has made a collage of beautiful colorful birds and flowers, brightness and beauty all around his room! Some of them are colorful drawings with words from the Psalms: “I will rejoice, I will lift my heart in song, I will greet the new dawn!” I couldn’t help but smile and marvel at all the beauty and positive vibes encompassing his small new home. He is honest with himself: This is something I can do right now, and do it well! Honesty about one’s limits and abilities is a form of vulnerability, which can always be blessed with love and joy!

So... a few words about our church family. We are small these days, we are worried about money, as usual. We are worried about younger

generations not showing up very often, as in many other churches. But... in honesty, we seek help, we seek communal strength. The choir showed its vulnerability recently by not doing every Sunday offerings, and by asking for help for Holy Week and Easter. Lo and behold, our skeleton choir of 4 probably will be 8 or 9 on Easter, with help from the Newburyport Choral Society, Alleluia! We asked for help, and we did receive. (Like the Beatles song: "Help, I need somebody, Help!") ... Perhaps it is a good model for our monetary woes; the Meetinghouse, especially, will need the help of not only fund raising from within, but fundraising that includes the greater community of music and arts. If we vulnerably ask for help, we trust that there is financial support out there, in ways we may not even know yet. The Cross is about weakness or vulnerability that is *transformed* toward strength.

I want to sing again the song that many of us heard in Easter season of 2022, composed for us by our friend Ken when he was with us for a weekend of concerts.

Song for Belleville, Sunday morning, April 24, 2022

Belleville you've worked so hard to do the right, to walk the path. Belleville, you work so hard to find the way to bring the grace. Day after day, week after week, year after year, you've seen the wrong, you've worked for the right, you've shed the tears. You've blessed the lonely, you've fed the hungry, you've run with the hopeless, brought joy to the destitute. Belleville, please don't give up. Now there is a work for you to do in this crazy, changing world. Oh Belleville, please don't give up! There's a path for you to walk that you've never walked before. Everything is changing, and sometimes it seems too fast. And you've got to wonder sometimes what will stay and what won't last. Belleville, you can never know your future, 'cause it's changing all the time. Nothing's ever certain. Of this I can be certain though: if you follow the path you see, Grace will be beside you as you work to set folks free! Oh Belleville, please don't give up! Keep moving on! Love this town. And they'll say of you in little ways, you turned their whole world upside down.