

**A SERMON GIVEN BY REV. DANIEL KLAWITTER  
UNIVERSITY PARK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

**Sunday, July 27, 2008**

**Title: The Weakness of God**

**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 1:25-29

**Theme:** May God give us the grace to use our freedom not in the service of unlimited power, but in the service of limitless love.

The rather provocative title of my sermon this morning comes from a book by John D. Caputo entitled *The Weakness of God, a theology of the event*. His basic thesis is that while the Bible certainly affirms the awesome power and saving acts of God in history, that power is often manifested through the paradox of weakness. In our Scripture this morning, St. Paul affirms this paradox by pointing out that God uses foolishness to shame the wise, weakness to shame the strong, and “what is low and despised in the world” to bring to nothing those things that are. And I would imagine that most of us can think of stories from the Bible that support Paul’s claims.

I think of Moses, who became a great leader despite his claim to have some sort of speech impediment. When God told Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, Moses replied, “But my Lord, never in my life have I been a man of eloquence, either before or since you have spoken to your servant. I am a slow speaker and not able to speak well.” (Exodus 4:10) But as we all know, God used Moses anyway. Or we might remember David, a shepherd boy of small stature who slew the giant Goliath (with a slingshot no less) and eventually became the King of Israel. And then there’s Mary...a poor teenage girl from Galilee who becomes the God-bearer, the mother of Christ.

But in spite of these and many other examples we could point to, the idea of God manifesting his will through weakness isn’t all that popular. Many folks still prefer their God to be absolutely omnipotent, all-powerful and all-

knowing. But taken too far, this notion of God as a kind of cosmic puppet-master who controls all things can have dangerous consequences. Consider the case of Wesley Parker in 1973.

Wesley Parker was diabetic and unfortunately for him, his parents were believers in the “Word of Faith” movement, a form of Christian fundamentalism that, among other things, believes it is possible for humans to manipulate God’s power to affect miraculous healings. After Wesley had been prayed over by a Faith evangelist, his parents decided to withhold insulin from their son. When Wesley grew ill and went into a diabetic coma, the Parkers decided, as they had been taught, that Satan was attempting to deceive them with false symptoms. Wesley died on August 23, 1973. Believing that God would raise their son from the dead, instead of a funeral, the Parkers held a “resurrection service” and continued to believe for an entire year that he would come back to life. Eventually, the Parkers were convicted of child abuse and involuntary manslaughter.

Now this may seem like an extreme and isolated example, but I bet many of us here today are familiar with people who have lost their faith in God because their idea of God’s omnipotence has been shaken...usually because something bad or tragic happened to them or someone they loved. Often, the anguished response to such events is something like “Why, God, did *you* let this happen to *me*?” Well, behind this kind of religious shock and disappointment in the face of loss, is this notion that God both controls and wills *everything* that happens in the world. But as

John Caputo writes in his book: “*By making God responsible for everything, such conceptual zeal limits God in another way, not by limiting God’s power, but by compromising God’s goodness.*”

For example, if I honestly believed that God wills and controls everything that happens in the world, then I too would have a bone to pick with God. Because it is difficult for me to conceive why a good and loving God who is all-powerful would allow 30,000 children to starve to death every day in the Two-Thirds World. And yet, many people still claim that such tragedies are “all part of God’s plan.”

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, expressed similar concerns about God’s omnipotence in his debates with the Calvinists over the doctrine of predestination. The reformer John Calvin stressed the doctrine of God’s sovereign power so much that he ended up teaching that from before all time God knows and determines the future, including who will go to heaven and who will go to hell, and there is nothing anybody can do to change where they will spend eternity. In response to this teaching, Wesley wrote:

The sovereignty of God is...never to be brought to supersede his justice. And this is the present objection against (*predestination*). It flatly contradicts, indeed utterly overthrows, the Scripture account of the justice of God...Now, if man be capable of choosing good or evil, then he is a proper object of the justice of God...But otherwise he is not. A mere machine is not capable of being either acquitted or condemned. Justice cannot punish a stone for falling to the ground; nor (on your scheme) a man for falling into sin. But you say: ‘It is the sovereign will of God.’ Then you have either found a new God, or made one! This is not the God of the Christians. (*Predestination Calmly Considered*, 1752).

John Wesley wrote those words in 1752. But even today, United Methodists have continued his legacy by contributing to a movement known as Process Theology. This school of thought teaches that God is not omnipotent in the sense of being coercive. Rather, the divine has a power of persuasion instead of force. Therefore, God does not totally control any series of events or override the self-determination of any individual, but God does influence our exercise of free will by offering us *possibilities*. To say it another way, God has a will in everything, but not everything that occurs is God’s will. Make sense? Otherwise, we are forced to defend events like the Holocaust or the daily incidents of domestic battery and assaults on women as being part of God’s plan.

Now I realize that for many people, the idea of a God who doesn’t absolutely control the future and have unlimited power is hard to swallow. But the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ doesn’t seem to me to be a God interested in control and power as much as he is interested in relationship and self-giving. And as we all know from our own experience, being in a relationship means being open to the process of change and the reality of suffering. In the New Testament, the Kingdom that Jesus preaches is a Kingdom whose power is very different from that of Rome. It isn’t a kingdom based on military might, but rather on the grace of turning the other cheek. The Kingdom of God is small like a mustard seed, not large like Caesar’s palace. Instead of a shout that demands obedience, the Kingdom of God is more like an ever present whisper.

As John D. Caputo puts it:

The kingdom calls. (*But*) a call is as weak as a word, as a breath of air, a trace, or a sigh, while the world is as tall as a mountain. Thus, in the kingdom of God, weak will-of-the-wisp words move mountains, provoking deep seismic

shifts in the movements of continents  
and the toppling of empires...The  
kingdom of God is the rule of weak  
forces like patience and forgiveness...  
The kingdom is living for the day, like  
the lilies of the field as opposed to  
mastering and programming time,  
calculating the future, containing and  
managing risk.

The paradox of the Christian faith is that we  
can become strong only by first becoming weak  
in the eyes of the world. By relinquishing our  
notion of strength as the power to compel, we  
enter instead into the transforming possibilities  
of compassion. For according to the Apostle  
Paul, the strength of God is revealed not in the  
power of control, but in the power of surrender.

In closing, I would invite you to hear these  
words from the Christian poet and writer  
Madeleine L' Engle:

Don't tell me cancer is a good God's will.  
Don't talk about the Great Prime Mover,  
how  
He knows all things, controls the future still.  
Give me God who makes his creatures free  
To play the story to a glorious finish,  
Whose power is in relinquishing power, so  
we  
May grow in love. Oh, let his power  
diminish  
As he comes in to us with all our pain,  
Who shows magnificence upon a cross,  
Who o'er a groaning universe does reign  
Until love triumphs over every loss.  
Only this God is strong enough to say  
"I love you," and so throw all power away.  
*(The Ordering of Love, new and collected  
poems).*

May God give us the grace to use our freedom  
not in the service of unlimited power, but in the  
service of limitless love. May it be so!