

“Power Source”

July 9, 2006

2 Corinthians 12: 9 (The Message version)

*My grace is enough, it's all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness.*

Mark 6: 5-6

*...And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.*

This week I got an education in our church building—how it works, and what some of our needs are. When I arrived at the church Wednesday morning the generator was running—it had come on when the power went out during the thunderstorms on Tuesday. And it was still running because the automatic off switch is broken and once it goes on it doesn't go off. Thankfully, Margaret Maddert came down to the church and showed Marie, Johanna and I how to turn it off. But not only was this a learning experience for me, it was also a metaphor for the message this morning. The generator—our power source—comes on when the power goes out. But it doesn't turn off. That is a metaphor that reminds me of God's grace and power—when we run out, God's there to back us up, and God doesn't quit.

Paul was writing to a church in Corinth, a city that knew a lot about power—signs of it were everywhere: the Temple of Apollo, the Isthmian Games which featured contests of athleticism and feats of power, and Corinth was a port city—the “master of two harbors”—a center for economic trade and a power broker for much of the Mediterranean world. And Paul's detractors and critics were also preaching in Corinth, and competing for followers, by boasting of their ecstatic spiritual experiences.

Paul has a story of his own ecstatic experience in which he was taken up into heaven and told things that he is forbidden to repeat (he tells this story in third person, trying to be somewhat humble). And he tries to explain how God is working through his very human weaknesses—the places where he is weak, unable to do all that he would like to do, the places where his faults and imperfections appear, is where God's grace and power are evident.

It is, and was, a counter-cultural message—the message of the Gospel. The very symbol of the cross, a symbol of abuse and shame in the ancient world, is God's sign of hope and redemption that endures in this world. You see, God uses “what is weak to shame the strong”. And when we are powerless, God's power is more visible.

In our culture, we are used to the message of self-sufficiency and personal achievement. We are encouraged to work toward perfection in most every way—physically, emotionally, in our jobs, families. So this is a counter-cultural message in our world, too.

Here at Woodside, we have been in the process of hiring a new Administrative Assistant. One of the questions that we have been asking in the interviews (which people have had a

very hard time answering) is “what are your strengths and what are your weaknesses?” How many of you have been asked that question in an interview before? In our interviews, people have struggled to answer this question. It’s a hard one, because in an interview you want to put your best foot forward; you want to appear to have no faults, so you say something like “my weaknesses are that I work too hard” or “some people say that I care too much about my work.” And those may be real weaknesses, but it’s important for us to be honest about our weaknesses, after all, all we all have them. We are human, and knowing where our weaknesses are allows us to support each other. For instance, I know that organization is not my strong suit, but Marie is very organized, so she can help support me in this area where I have a weakness. And our weaknesses are places where God can work on us, too.

I know most of the world is focused on the World Cup final today, but there is another big sporting event going on in Europe right now—the Tour de France. The American that many people think has a chance to win this year is Floyd Landis. Landis grew up in a Mennonite family in Lancaster County, Penn. and wanted to be a mountain bike racer—but he trained too much: “the harder I worked, the worse I got, because the races were too short. I trained for 5 hours a day and the races were only 2 hours.” But God used this “weakness” to open another door of opportunity—it turned out that his obsessive training style was ideally suited for the long distance demands of road racing. Sometimes a perceived weakness can turn out to be a real asset, when we give God the opportunity to use it.

And his Christian background that taught him humility and hard work has been seen by some to be a weakness: “Does he have the killer instinct like a Lance Armstrong?” (Phil Liggett, analyst/announcer for the tour on Outdoor Life Network asked). But his team member Robert Hunter says: “In many instances he hasn’t been prepared to totally waste the team for his own benefit...He’s always thinking of the team’s consideration before thinking of himself. Then that makes us say, ‘Don’t think about us.’ But there’s an upside: a lot of the time the guys end up sacrificing more for him.” (Wash Post Sunday July 2, Style section)

So I would like to invite you to think about this: What are your/our weaknesses? This is something that we should examine in our own spiritual lives—where are the places where we need God’s help, where God is seeking to grow and stretch us, or lead us to a new thing? Do we need to slow down, take on few commitments, spend more time in prayer or with family? Or do we need to step up, to give more of ourselves to God, to our community?

I think this is also an important message for our church to consider at the present moment. We need to consider our strengths, as well as our weaknesses. Where are the places that we, as a community, are struggling to be faithful, to grow, to further the mission God has for us.

Over the next six months or so, I intend to have one-on-one meetings with all of you, beginning with the leaders but I want to meet with everyone. I want to know what your

hopes and dreams are for our church. I want to know what you think is great. I want us to reflect together on where our weaknesses are, too.

Let's us be clear, though, that our weaknesses, whether personal or communal, are not necessarily the same as "problems." Problems may be the sign of a lack of faith or even sin. We see this in Mark's gospel: When the people didn't have faith in Jesus, when they did not recognize his power as God's power, they were disconnected from the "power source"—all Jesus could do there among them was to lay his hands on the few sick people who did believe and cure them. But for those who did believe, and chose to follow, they "cast out many demons, and anointed and cured many who were sick." And they did all this with great weakness—they went out without bread, or bags, or even money—just faith and persistence. Weakness is an opportunity for God to work in and through us, but "problems" like a lack of faith or in the inability to recognize God's presence and power—those things can limit what God is able to do within and through us.

So let us be thankful this day for our weaknesses—because they show us who God is and what God is able to do. Let us trust God's power, which is far greater than our own, to keep things going, and to do new things, all in the name of Christ. Amen.