

Preacher: Tim Hollenberg-Duffey

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 9:19-23; 10:31-33

Weakness, exhaustion, weariness—sound familiar? Can you relate to those simple words?

Paula Poundstone reflected on that famous scripture in Romans 6: "the wages of sin is death," and she proposes, "The wages of sin is death, but by the time they take out taxes, it's really just more of a tired feeling."¹ So we are paying for our sin with exhaustion—I don't know about that, but we do wear out.

Many years ago, journalist John Burns wrote an email to a fellow exhausted laborer. He wrote, "For a couple years I've been blaming it on iron-deficient blood, on vitamins, dieting and a dozen other maladies. But now I've found out the real reason: it's because we're overworked. The population of this country is 237 million. 104 million are retired. That leaves 133 million to do the work of the entire nation. There are 85 million in school, which leaves 48 million to do the work. Of this, there are 29 million employed by the federal government. This leaves 19 million to do the work. Four million are in the armed forces, which leaves 15 million to do the work. Take from the total the 14,800,000 people who work for state and city government, and that leaves 200,000 to do the work. There are 188,000 ill and in hospitals, so that leaves 12,000 to do the work. Now, there are 11,998 people in prisons. That leaves just two people to do the work. You and me. And you're sitting there reading this e-mail."²

Obviously, something isn't adding up there, but I think you get the point. It's part of the human experience—weakness, exhaustion, and weariness.

And so, in Paul's letter to the Church in Corinth, he says he became weak. Well, of course you did, Paul. Paul's been traveling all of the Mediterranean trying to start and visit churches. Of course, he became weak. Most of us try to avoid this feeling of weakness, but Paul makes it sound like he chooses it. He says in Chapter 9, verse 22, "To the weak, I became weak, to win the weak." To win the weak. The weakness that Paul is talking about is not necessarily a physical weakness, but rather a spiritual one. Apparently, some of those in Corinth have a weak understanding of the Gospel and, therefore, are interpreting some things wrong or wanting to carry some things over from contemporary culture that aren't necessary. For instance, continuing to follow Jewish food laws isn't necessary but also not a big deal if some people still think they have to. Paul is suggesting that for the sake of the weaker theological minds among us, the weaker spiritual understanding—it is not a big deal to compromise on a few things. Especially compromising a few insignificant things for the sake of the acceptance of Christ as Lord.

Since when has compromise become indicative of weakness? I believe we may be thinking about this all wrong. Compromise is far from weak if by negotiating some less important details, someone can actually commit their life to the Jesus way of love, mercy and peace. Compromising doesn't necessarily mean a watering down of our faith if it means a new faith can take root and grow from there. So, make room for the weak and weary among us, and let's see what must be done for faith to take root.

In our culture, we do not like to show our weakness. We like to demonstrate our strength and our ability to accomplish and win and grow. Advertisers are masters of painting their products in the hands of the happy and successful, the young and the beautiful. Therefore, what a myth we have created that such depictions of "perfect" people exist. There are no perfect

¹homileticonline.com

²https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?item_topic_id=1917

people, only "ordinary" people. I think one of our Sunday School classes would agree with that. And ordinary people get tired and weak and worn.

I think Paul is speaking to these folks, too. Any minister who embraces their humanity should be able to say with Paul, "we become weak, and we hope despite our weakness, that some come to know the Gospel." But it's really not about us.

This week, we recall the story of Jesus choosing to embrace fully the weakness and weariness that is our human experience. We like to picture Jesus like some superman, but that's not what he chooses to be for much of this Holy Week. As his disciples are weak and weary, so too does Jesus reveal his human weariness. As he approaches Jerusalem, he sheds a tear for the wandering of this great city. As he rides into Jerusalem, he sits on a colt's back rather than on a majestic horse. As he dines with his disciples, he stoops to wash feet. As his disciples slip into sleep out of exhaustion, Jesus prays like an overwhelmed man facing the greatest fears of life.

For the weak, Jesus becomes weak. Next Sunday, we can celebrate the superman Jesus who defeats death, but this week, I do believe there is something to celebrate in the Jesus who identifies with human weakness. As Paul compromises on the law in order to connect with people about their savior, Jesus compromises his absolute and divine power to connect with us in our weakness. Even Jesus got tired, or as one Facebook meme says, "even Jesus took naps."

I don't always need superman Jesus. Sometimes I need Jesus who identifies with my exhaustion. Jesus who sits with me in my tiredness and says its ok, rest, it won't always be like this. And Jesus is willing to sacrifice his greatness to come and do that with us. This is an ultimate compromise—giving up one of the hallmarks of divinity to be human and experience our weakness.

As we read the stories this week of Christ becoming weak even to the point of his mortal body giving way on the cross, I invite you to connect with Christ in his weakness. You share this in common with the Lord of all. We share weakness. In the weakness of Christ, I find my place with God.

You know for some it is the weakness of Christ during this Holy Week that makes our faith laughable. A nearly 2000-year-old graffiti in Rome shows a well. Now commonly known as Alexamenos Graffiti, the graffiti was sketched in a plaster wall on Palatine Hill in Rome at an imperial boarding school. It is a mocking parody of a sketch clearly meant as an insult against the boy Alexamenos who must be a Christian. It is mocking because the graffiti shows a boy, presumably Alexamenos, praying before a cross from which hangs a man with a donkey's head. The writing says, "Alexamenos worships his God." A cruel joke—a boy praying to a donkey on a cross. The donkey in antiquity represents foolishness, folly, weakness. It is meant to elicit a laugh at the expense of this ridiculously weak God whom those Christians worship. What God is put to death? What God would hang on a cross?

Interestingly enough, however, a nearby inscription in the plaster reads "Alexamenos is faithful."³ Maybe Alexamenos inscribed this himself or he had a supporter. But someone else realized that the "weakness" of Jesus was not something to laugh at all. Rather weakness was/is the only reason we can connect with Christ. While the world sees Jesus' humanity as a laughable sign of his ridiculousness as God, those faithful followers who know Jesus know that the humanity he displays in this Holy Week is the reason he is so great. To willingly dispose of greatness and power to experience human frailty and weakness, this is the ultimate expression of love for us.

³ Campbell, Charles. *Preaching Fools*. Baylor Press, 2012. pp 3-5.

April 14, 2019, Palm Sunday - "A King for All People"

May this Jesus call those of us who are frail, tired, and burdened to identify with him and in our weakness find new hope in the God who loves us more than anything. Amen.