

Church, State, and the Mission of God: The Power of Weakness – Matt Zahniser

2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10; Psalm 48; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13

Dawn helps implement a Friday night community meal for all types of people, including the otherwise homeless people who live at Good Works in Athens, Ohio. She supplied their monthly report to friends and supporters with her testimony of what I would call *power made perfect in weakness*: Dawn was going through the motions, keeping busy with her tasks in order to avoid conversation. “Heroically,” as she puts it, she was picking up vegetables that had been trampled into the grass and on her way with them to the trash can when Randall began talking to her. She says, Randall, “unkempt and unpredictable,” was talking *at* her as usual, a person she was “afraid of and tried to avoid.” She only pretended to listen to him, plotting a way of escape. In Dawn’s own words, “Randall wasn’t responding to any of . . . [my] social cues. . . . [So] I silently asked Jesus for help. Even though everything in me wanted to bolt, I decided to face my inner discomfort head on and lean into the moment.” (I like that phrase, “lean into the moment.”) She goes on to say, “The squished vegetables in my hand were now teaching my heart how to love, and really listen to Randall. As I let go of my agitation, I suddenly found the situation strangely humorous. A certain softness came over me, and him. I shed the fear that I had carried toward Randall, and he actually began to pause from his monologue and ask me questions. We conversed about gardening, a shared hobby. As if lights had been switched on in my mind, I began to *see* [her italics] Randall for the first time. I saw good and beautiful qualities inside him, particularly his tenderness towards living creatures. I noticed how hard he works, and the integrity with which he stewards land and resources. I saw a gentle man, made in God’s image.” (*Good Works, Inc.—A Community of Hope*, July 2015:1). In her weakness before her onslaught by Randall, Dawn called on Jesus, and the power of her Christian service—the reason she was at Good Works in the first place—was made perfect by Jesus.

This homily is about the **power of weakness**.

One reason we have an Old Testament text is to give us background so we can understand our Gospel reading better, and one reason we have an epistle reading is to show us how the example and words of Jesus worked themselves out in the early church. One reason we stand for the reading of the Gospel is that it contains the example and words of Jesus, who is not only our Savior and Lord but also our example and teacher. Our lectionary readings for today allow us to look at two anointed ones, or Messiahs, king David, the epitome of strength and about as good a national leader as history provides, and king Jesus, a son of David. Jesus responds to involuntary weakness, in the form of a rejection in his home town, with a mission of teaching in surrounding villages. He follows up his own mission by sending his disciples on a mission of their own, characterized by **a voluntary weakness**. We then have a lection from the second epistle of Paul to his Corinthian church, featuring a tribute to the **power of weakness**. It is my purpose to apply these passages from God’s Word to a relationship of church and state that could be termed **voluntary weakness**.

First, let’s consider King David and the power of the state (2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10). The passage from Second Samuel shows the people of Judah and Israel acclaiming David as King over them. They acclaim him as their own, *Look*, they say, *we are your bone and flesh. . . . [I]t was you who*

led out Israel and brought it in (meaning led its armies in battle; see Numbers 27:17; 1 Samuel 18:14). It was the Lord who appointed you *shepherd over my people Israel*. This was followed up with the gathering of all the elders, the establishing of a covenant, and the anointing of David king over Israel. After reigning over Judah at Hebron for seven years, and after defeating the Jebusites who occupied Jerusalem, David established his throne and reigned there for 33 more years. And, as our reading concludes, *David became greater and greater for the Lord* (2 Samuel 5:10). Just the quantity of the territory acquired and controlled by David during his 40-year reign is astounding. Before David's reign, the average width of Israel and Judah was a little over 50 miles; afterwards it was more like 95 miles; its maximum length before was 165 miles and afterwards 375 miles. According to a respectable biographical sketch, David was a man of honor, of diplomatic skill, of charisma, an excellent military strategist and politically shrewd, an excellent musician and poet, and deeply religious. In fact, "religion played a vital role in every major move made by the king" (J. M. Meyers, "David," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* 1962:1.781a). David also had his times of weakness, however: when the prophet Nathan challenged him over his murder of Uriah, a ruse he used to obscure his adultery with Bathsheba, Uriah's wife, he repented—a king repented! (2 Samuel 11:1-12:25).

Messiah David was so wonderful that the Jews believed the coming Messiah, who would put things right again, would be David's descendant, a "son of David." This is one reason why people, especially Jesus' own disciples, were surprised that he did not take up the reins of power by force and show how the state should be governed. He would bring peace on earth through holy and righteous dominance, sovereign righteous power.

Now let's look at King Jesus and the power of the Church (Mark 6:1-13).

It is easy to forget that Christ was not Jesus' last name. Christ is an English language transliteration of the Greek word, *christos*, meaning "anointed one." *Christos* is a Greek translation of the Hebrew word Messiah which also means "anointed one" and, in this context, king. James A. Reinhard, a hero of mine, in his commentary on Mark (published by Light and Life Press for adult Sunday school classes across the Free Methodist denomination), says the events of Mark chapter 6, including our gospel portion for today, "were designed to evoke the great confession of Mark 8:30" (Adult International Uniform Series for January, February and March, 1963: 16). What was that confession? *You are the Messiah*, stated by Peter—that is, the long awaited anointed king like David.

The first five verses of our gospel text from Mark describe what must have been an agonizing rejection of Jesus in his home town of Nazareth. People resented his great powers because he was merely—as far as they knew—a homegrown carpenter from a well-known family headed by Mary (vv. 1-5).

Jesus shows his practice of the perfecting power of weakness by simply quoting a proverb: *Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house* (4). How about that response from someone who can still a storm, walk on water, and raise the dead?! He then embarks on a tour of surrounding villages *teaching*—exactly what he was doing in Nazareth when the people rejected him. A weak response to a painful rejection may

contain the seeds of wider witness (T. J. Geddert, *Mark*. Believers Church Commentary, 2001:136). One wonders what Messiah David would have done if similarly rejected. A further extension of the witness and work of evangelism takes place when Jesus—probably accompanied by his disciples—returns from the tour. He gives the Twelve instructions for a tour of their own. In these instructions we see that Jesus counts on them to carry out their mission **in the power of weakness** also.

Now notice that Jesus' instructions are long on the *manner* of the mission and short on the content of the witness. Preaching and healing are mentioned in Mark's brief description of the mission itself (6:12 and 13), and he adds teaching in his brief mention of the apostles' own report of their journey (6:30) (R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. 2002:246). When Jesus commissions them he merely gives them *authority over the unclean spirits* (6:7), followed by guidelines as to how to carry out their mission (6:8-11).

They were to go *two by two*, for companionship and support and maybe because the Torah requires two witnesses, so two together will corroborate the witness of each other (Deuteronomy 17:6) (France, 247-8; Geddert, 137).

He *gave them authority over the unclean spirits*; in that time and place this was a powerful authority.

He ordered them to *take nothing for their journey except a staff*. All travelers on foot in those days carried a staff; "travel without a staff was unthinkable" (France, 248).

He permitted them *to wear sandals*—travelers also wore sandals or went barefoot—but he forbade them *to put on two tunics*—maybe that means no extra clothes for the journey (Geddert, 137).

They were to take no bread, no bag—possibly for begging, but it can also be translated "back pack"—and no money; in other words they were to depend on the hospitality of the people they were sent to evangelize. We learned of Jesus' own implementation of the model with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well in Sychar. Weary and warm, Jesus says to this woman, *Give me a drink*. The surprise request for hospitality, from a Jewish rabbi to a Samaritan woman, creates an event that turns the woman herself into an evangelist (John 4:7-30).¹

¹ Georgann Kurtz-Shaw not too long ago gave us a sermon on Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well in the Samaritan town of Sychar. She emphasized that Jesus' primary reason for going through Samaria was theological, to show that God includes all people in divine love. Jesus was tired; he was sitting by the well; a Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, *Give me a drink*. Jesus is weak from his journey; he recognizes the human dignity of this member of a despised minority; he confesses his need, depending on her as host and fellow human. He uses the event to talk about what he knows best, living water and *how* to obtain it, and *how* not *where* to worship God: Eventually all will worship God in spirit and truth. When she politely changes the subject asserting, *When the Messiah comes, he will proclaim all things to us*, Jesus then has a perfect chance to point her to the Messiah. He says to her, *I am he, the one who is speaking to you*. Note that Jesus adds the unnecessary phrase, *the one who is speaking to you*, to highlight his inclusive love, building on his having asked her for a drink (John 4:26). God loves the whole world; no exceptions. It is something like this he expects from his disciples.

Reinhard concludes that Jesus probably anticipated a rather short stay in each *place* (that is, “community”) they visited (Reinhard, 18). *Wherever you enter a house, ordered Jesus, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them* (10b-11).

This is a picture of simplicity, poverty, dependence, and vulnerability. It is non-coercive, void even of pressure; it relies on voluntary hospitality and avoids competitive hospitality. My point here in this homily is that the way of Messiah Jesus **is voluntary weakness**.

That’s the way of the church in mission, gatherings of disciples who are taught by Jesus—inspired by Jesus—obedient to Jesus—sent by Jesus—and one with Jesus in the way of **the weakness of the cross that leads home**.

Now listen to Paul defending this power of weakness (2 Corinthians 12: 2-10). Paul is defending himself in this selection near the end of a long “boast,” to which he feels pressed by competition for the allegiance of the Corinthian church he founded from competing missionaries (who apparently boast of their deep and supernatural spiritual experiences). Scholarship is not certain of who these people were. Paul wants to say he also has had deep and exalting spiritual experiences which he is not forced to defend. And he also has weaknesses, possibly a lack of eloquence as a public speaker and something resulting from his not asking any financial remuneration from this church whom he loves. This passage climaxes the section on his ecstatic spiritual experience (See V. G. Shillington on this passage in *2 Corinthians*. Believers Church Bible Commentary. 1997: 228-232). It is a poetic piece extolling the power of weakness:²

[T]o keep me from being **too elated**,
A THORN was given me in the flesh,
A MESSENGER OF SATAN to **torment** me,
to keep me from being **too elated**.
Three times I appealed to THE LORD about this,
that it would leave me,

but HE said to me,
“MY grace is sufficient for you,
for power is made perfect in *weakness*.”
So I will boast all the more gladly in my *weaknesses*,
so that the power of **Messiah** may dwell in me.
Therefore I am content with *weaknesses*, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities
for the sake of **Messiah**;
for whenever I am *weak*, I am strong (vv. 7b-10).

² I have laid it out in a structural diagram to show the relation of the parts of the two poetic pieces and the force especially of repeated phrases: *to keep me from being too elated* (the initial phrase of the first segment of the first piece and at the center of the first piece). This creates strong emphasis in biblical rhetoric. So too does the repetition of the words *weak*, *weakness*, and *weaknesses* along with the *Messiah* in the second piece (the two pieces are separated by a broken line).

So what do these texts have to do with the issue of church and state?

First, the state needs a strong church perfected by **the power of weakness**: we should lay aside the messianic model of Israel under the great king David. True, it was an ideal time for Israel as a nation—it was united, it was powerful, its territory was extended, righteousness was widespread and God’s reputation was enhanced.

But Jesus, son of David gave us a new Messianic model of being church. He told us to participate in the governing powers of the state: to *render to Caesar what is Caesar’s*, namely, our taxes along with other ways of participating in governing and citizenship. He told us to *render unto God what is God’s*: just as the coin was impressed with the image of Caesar, so we know that all people are stamped with the image of God—no exceptions! We have a democratic nation where, ideally at least, the will of the people prevails, not the coercive power of a sovereign. We have a court, a legislature, and an executive branch that are called to do the will of the people within the limits of humane values established by our constitution as amended. The foundational principle is that all people are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Apparently President Harry S. Truman once remarked, “The Bible is the foundation of our Bill of Rights.” But this should not motivate us to work for a kingdom choosing a king, even a king like Messiah David, however grand and glorious he was. Jesus Messiah, King Jesus, the son of David, left his church with a different model, one that fits democracy like a glove. Remember democracy is based on the rights of all people equally, as the bumper sticker on the Nords’ car has it: God loves the whole world—no exceptions.

Second, the church in society lives out this simple democratic principle by implementing it in their own church community, by practicing it in the public and private arenas of society, and by advocating in a democratic and non-violent way for those in the society who are not benefitting as others are from what should be their inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. An influential pastor, Timothy Keller, in his book *Generous Justice* (2010: 21), hones in on this issue, “Christians now do not constitute a theocratic kingdom-state, but exist as an international communion of local assemblies living in every nation and culture, under many different governments to whom they give great respect but never absolute allegiance” (cited in B. Lowe, *Doing Good without Giving Up*. 2014: 78). Christians should not try to create situations where people are **constrained** to follow the values of Jesus’ kingdom; rather they should follow their Lord in influencing others to do so in the simple, dependent, vulnerable, non-coercive, and humble way implied by our Lord’s directions for his followers’ mission. Remember Jesus, according to Mark, focused on the **manner of mission** even more than on its message and deeds of power.

The Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina exemplifies the perfecting **power of weakness**. A young gunman inspired by a belief in Euro American racial superiority killed nine people in a Bible study. This church responded with transparent forgiveness and in their funeral services expressed the militant meekness of Christian love for all people—no exceptions. Charles Krauthammer of the *Washington Post* devoted a big chunk of

his column, published in the *Post-Dispatch* recently, to the impact of this church's response, which led to Governor Nikki Haley's call for the removal of the Confederate flag from the South Carolina state house and its transfer to a museum; this decision precipitated a movement of similar responses on the part of government and even commerce. Following is a long quote from Krauthammer: What triggered this surprising move was not just the massacre itself, but "the breathtaking display of nobility and spiritual generosity by the victims' relatives. Within 48 hours of the murder of their loved ones, they spoke of redemption and reconciliation and even of forgiveness of the killer himself. It was an astonishingly moving expression of Christian charity. Such grace demands a response. In a fascinating dynamic, it created a feeling of moral obligation to reciprocate in some way. . . . The result was a microcosm of—and a historical lesson in—the moral force of the original civil rights movement, whose genius was to understand the effect that combatting evil with good, violence with grace would have on a fundamentally decent American nation" ("On lowering the flag," Saint Louis *Post-Dispatch*, June 26, 2015: 15).

Those of you who follow the news know that the whole nation has been affected by how this church handled their time of weakness and power of love. Although people do not universally and consistently practice the virtues of simplicity, humility, and love, **they universally admire them**. The **power of weakness** lies somewhere here in the admiration that inspires hospitality, respects generosity, values fairness, and laps up love.

Rather than arguing for the posting of the Ten Commandments at county courthouses, we Christians should post the beatitudes in our hearts, and, inspired by God's grace and tapping into the power of weakness, take the way of the cross that leads home. It is the way of Messiah Jesus, son of David, son of God. The Lord may be saying to us, on this Lord's Day immediately after Independence Day, what he said to the beleaguered Apostle Paul, *My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness* (2 Corinthians 12:9).