

Weakness and Strength

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Have you ever wondered how your life might have been different if your parents had given you a different name? Names, after all, can be powerful things. Some of us struggle with the names that were given us, and about which we had no choice. “What were they thinking?” we might ask. So we may prefer nicknames, or our middle names, or even substitutes for our given names. Others of us like our names just fine.

I wasn't always happy with my own parents' choice for me of “Dale.” At the tender age of five or six, because of teasing by my friends, I was made acutely aware that I shared a first name with Dale Evans. I would have preferred to have been identified with Roy Rogers. Much later, when I represented the United Church of Christ in our relationships in the Middle East, church leaders there would struggle with the pronunciation of my first name. Sometimes they'd try to say it phonetically, and they'd come out with something like “Dah-leh.” I eventually learned that “Dale” in Arabic means “tail”, as in the appendage on an animal, which may be why they looked for an alternative pronunciation. Added to all that was confusion about my last name, which some interpreted as an ecclesiastical title. One of my favorite moments was when the patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Pope Shenouda III, introduced me to a large gathering as “His Grace, Bishop Dah-leh.” After a meeting in Beirut, I received a cherished plaque from the Armenian Evangelical Church in the Near East, given to “Bishop Dale.” My staunchly Protestant Armenian friends wanted to change the plaque—they explained that the guy who made it was Orthodox—but I wouldn't let them.

When I asked my parents what they were, in fact, thinking when they named me, I learned that my name had been the cause of a major battle between them. My family was, in a very limited way, a mixed family—a mix of German Reformed and German Lutherans. Grandpa was renegade of the family, having married a non-Lutheran Reformed girl, so he was always on the defensive with his brothers, all three of whom were Lutheran pastors. The Lutheran side of the family was loaded with Pauls, and I think that my dad wanted to validate his father's denominational choice by naming me Paul. (“We have a Paul, too!”) Dad also had hopes that I would become a minister, and I suspect that he thought that naming me Paul would give me a jumpstart in that direction. But Dad lost that battle over my name because my mother thought that the name Paul was just too stern.

And I can understand my mother's feelings. The name Paul undeniably carries with it connotations of seriousness and weightiness. Paul was, after all, the first real theologian and missionary of the Christian faith. From time to time, I like to talk about the distinction between religion and faith. I think that religion represents an attempt to clarify faith and to put it into doctrinal and legal form, not always to its benefit. Paul's letters to the early churches were not meant to be theological treatises—they really are letters. But these letters provided for the early church the first discussions of the issues that were to define Christianity: the humanity and the divinity of Jesus; the relationship of works and faith; the relationship between Christians and Jews, and, by extension, between Christians and people of other faiths; free will and predestination. All of these topics, and more, we find in Paul's letters.

Paul was well suited to the role of theologian. Before his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, a conversion that led to his own name change from Saul to Paul, Paul was a Pharisee, a man steeped in the finer points of Jewish law. And he brought some of that spirit to his new life as a

follower of Jesus. Paul loved to list things: things we should do, things we shouldn't do. There is an echo of the Leviticus spirit in some of Paul's writings. If you want to find biblical verses with which to bludgeon people you don't agree with, Paul can be a rich source—not as rich as Leviticus, but a rich source nevertheless.

Some of us have problems with that side of Paul: his views on women—essentially that they should keep quiet and be submissive; his ambiguity about slavery; his acquiescence to civil authority, which in Paul's day meant obedience to Rome, and in our day has been used to justify the separation of refugee children from their parents without a moral qualm. And, perhaps most of all, Paul's tendency to judge others harshly.

But the Paul who reveals himself in today's epistle lesson from II Corinthians is far from the self-assured and stern former Pharisee we sometimes imagine him to be. This is a Paul who has been brought low, brought low by competing evangelists, brought low by the circumstances of the early church, brought low by an unnamed affliction, a thorn, Paul calls it. This is a very human, almost tender Paul. We don't know what his affliction, what he calls his thorn, was: some scholars have suggested that it might have been stuttering, or epilepsy. We don't know, and it really doesn't matter. What we do know is that Paul had learned, the hard way, that he had been brought low in order to experience the grace of Christ. He had been brought low in order to plumb the depths of God's love.

It was when Paul was brought low, when his weakness was most painful and most palpable that Paul could identify most fully with Jesus. It was then that he recognized, in his own life, the central message of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. He says it eloquently and poignantly, as he heard it directly from Jesus after he had prayed for deliverance from his malady, "My grace is sufficient to

you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” In order for Christ’s power to dwell in him, Paul says, he had to identify with Jesus. He had to identify with the one who was rejected, with the one whose powerlessness was made manifest on the cross. To be a follower of Jesus, he had to be like Jesus. He had to feel that powerlessness himself. It is when we are brought down low that we can go deep. Or, as Paul says, “When I am weak, then I am strong.”

All of this is counter-intuitive in an age when worldly and material success is often considered to be a sign of God’s favor. But it’s when we are so sure of ourselves, so certain of our own righteousness, so convinced that God has favored us because of our own goodness or our cleverness, that we are most impervious to the gospel, most incapable of receiving God’s grace. It’s then that we are most in real trouble. Some years ago there was a popular self-help psychology book entitled, “I’m OK, You’re OK.” Well, Paul’s answer to that is, “I’m not OK, you’re not OK, but because of God’s grace, that’s OK.” When we recognize that we’re not OK; when we’re brought low by life’s vicissitudes or our own failings; when we are weak; it is at that point that we are laid open, wounds and all, to Jesus’ grace and Jesus’ strength, a strength perfected in weakness.

In last week’s Gospel lesson there was a woman with a twelve-year hemorrhage. You remember it, I hope. In faith, this woman reached out and touched Jesus’ clothes. In her weakness, she opened herself to his power and healing strength. And she was made whole.

In today’s Gospel lesson from Mark, which immediately follows that account, Jesus returns to the town of his childhood, where people are quite sure that they know him, know him too well, it turns out. They can’t imagine that this local boy could do anything for them. They were incapable of faith in someone so familiar to them. I remember that when I was installed as Middle East Executive of the

United Church Board for World Ministries, our board met in my home church in Ohio. There was a lot of pageantry, at least a lot of pageantry for North Canton, Ohio, and a lot of embarrassingly exuberant things said about me, almost to the point where I was expected single-handedly to bring peace to the Middle East. Afterward one woman, one of my Sunday School teachers, looked me in the eye and said, “I changed your diapers.” That kind of familiarity may not breed contempt, but it does introduce a note of reality.

In Nazareth, because they thought they really knew Jesus, people couldn't bring themselves to have faith in him. They were smug in what they thought they knew; they were filled with their own certainty that this son of Joseph the carpenter had nothing to offer them. They lacked faith, and because they lacked faith, they denied themselves the realization of Jesus' grace. As Mark puts it, “He could do no deed of power there.” Can Jesus do a deed of power here, for you, for us?

I began this reflection with a little discourse about names. I'll conclude it the same way. The most important name that I will ever carry, that you will ever carry, is the name of Christ, when we call ourselves Christians, or followers of Christ. It's the name we were given when we were baptized; it's the name we claimed for ourselves when we were confirmed or when we professed our faith as adults. It's the name that defines us as no other name can. It's the name that gives us our real identity, above all other names. It's the name that at our lowest points gives us strength; it's the name that forgives us and gives us the chance to start all over even when we have done the seemingly unforgivable. It's the name that simultaneously lifts us up and forces us down into a deeper understanding of who we are and whose we are.

When we call ourselves Christians, we identify ourselves with the Jesus who was rejected by people in his hometown of Nazareth, and, more profoundly, with the Jesus who, utterly weak, alone and abandoned, was nailed to a cross in the holy city of Jerusalem. When we call ourselves Christians we identify with the Jesus whose weakness became our strength, whose abandonment on the cross was transformed through the Holy Spirit into the community of his followers, the church. When we take the name of Christ for ourselves, we identify with the Jesus whose death becomes our life.

“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”

“When I am weak, then I am strong.”

May it be so. Amen.