
The strength of weakness
Chapel in the Park United Church
June 23, 2024
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 2 Corinthians 12:2-10 and Mark 6:1-13

I need to start with a question. Have you ever pulled a boat on a trailer? Or better yet, have you ever pulled a boat out of the water at a launch ramp? If you never tried, you will have to imagine it. Imagine that you are trying to pull a boat out of the water at a ramp and you are failing. You just cannot get enough torque. At the exact moment when you know you are in big trouble, can you imagine yelling out and asking for less power? I'm guessing, "no". I'm going to guess that as you are almost but not quite pulling your boat out of the water at the boat ramp, I imagine you are saying, "I just need a little more power".

Have you ever been camping, or canoeing. And after a hard day, you were digging through the bag that contained the remnants of your food. Some of it destroyed by water, some of it squashed flat because someone sat on it. Did you yell out, "I just need less food". I'm going to guess "no". I'm going to guess that you would be yelling, "I need more food".

And in our churches, what's the last time we ran into some sort of issue or problem. And we decided our collective lives would go better if we just had fewer people coming to our church. Or that things would go better if we just had less money to worry about managing?

Maybe it's just me, but I find that in normal, every-day, conversations, most of the time we complain that we want more of things. More money, more time, more energy, more understanding from other people, more knowledge, more ... just more!

The only time we are usually happy with less is when we can get out of the grocery store faster because we can use the lane that says "10 items or less". And that is just a quirk of the English language, because the sign should actually read "10 items or fewer". See - we NEVER actually want "less"!

Which is why I find our readings so interesting today. Today's passages are a call

for us to embrace “less”. Not to endure “less”. Not to put up with less temporarily. But to actually embrace and welcome “less” into our lives.

In Second Corinthians, St. Paul says, “God's power is made perfect in our weakness”, so we are invited to be weak. That’s a little vague. But in the gospel of Mark Jesus makes it very concrete. Jesus sends his disciples to villages in teams of two, but directs the disciples to take practically nothing with them. They are told to take ... a staff.

And don't get too excited here. Jesus does not mean a staff that includes a chauffeur, a butler, and Gordon Ramsey as a chef. Jesus means a stick. Of wood. Not only that, but the disciples are explicitly told to not take any food or money with them. What sort of strategy is this? And how are we to understand that idea today?

Today, in our churches, I hear a lot of talk about “more”. We seem to want more of things. Perhaps we want more children in worship. Perhaps we want more money. Perhaps we want more participation. I don't think we usually want “less”. But what does “less” look like anyway? What might “less” look like? What kind of church would we be if we stopped waiting for “more” and instead we embraced who we already are.

I was not here at the time, but I assume that in many ways, the pandemic forced us into “less”. Less time together. Less singing together. Less eating together. The pandemic gave us some view into what “less” might look like. But that’s not what Jesus was talking about. Because - where I was during the pandemic - we were all grumbling and complaining about just about everything during the pandemic. The call - and the challenge from Jesus - is to embrace less. To thrive even with less. Complaining does not cut it.

As a brief aside - the pandemic gave us gifts too. Often gifts that we did not necessarily appreciate at the time. The pandemic forced our worship to go online, which enabled the situation we have today. Now, members who are sick or members who live a long way away can still worship with us. In fact, here at "Chapel in the Park" we even have a satellite called “Chapel in the Basement” which is physically located in Brantford. And today some of the people from CITB are in our midst. That would not have been possible without the pandemic. Aside over.

Personally, I love the story about Jesus sending the disciples into other towns with

practically no supports. But today, we can turn that around. We don't have to go to other towns. There is lots to do right here in Thorncliffe Park (and Brantford). We can help create a healthier community right where we are! The invitation from Jesus is to realize that we don't need more of anything to embrace our own community. We already have enough. We already are enough.

I can hear you already - sounds good in theory, right? Rev Paul wants to lull us to sleep with a gentle message today so that he can slip off to do his continuing education. This idea of embracing less is not really a serious idea, is it? Well, you can decide that for yourself. But I'm sure you'd love to hear a few examples, right?

I want to share a couple of stories from my own past. And I look forward to hearing your own stories during coffee time after service. I'm sure we all have our own stories of ministry without any particular resources. Perhaps sure that some of the Brantford folk can tell you the power of a simple drum. We all have stories of a ministry of less. Perhaps even a ministry of basically nothing at all. Well, not really nothing, because there is a key ingredient that needs to be present for any ministry of less. But we'll get to that.

When I was in ministry in Mimico, I often commuted by GO train. One day, while I was going into work on the train, I overheard a passenger say to another passenger that he was looking for a clarinet. This was back in the days when GO trains did not run so frequently. So many commuters took the exact same train every day. And often, they sat in the same seat every day too. So I went over and said, "excuse me, did you say that you are looking for a clarinet?" And he said, "Yes". And I said, "Are you going to be on this same train tomorrow?" And he said, "Yes". And I walked away. That evening, I rooted around in my basement and found an old clarinet. It seemed to be in working condition. So I took it with me and caught the GO train the next day and found the person and said, "Here you go". I handed him the clarinet and said I hoped it would make more pleasant noises for him than it had ever made for me. But then I asked, "Why is the clarinet special to you?" What followed was a 20 minute pastoral visit about the other person's long and complicated love life. His search for meaning and connection, and the hard work that life can be.

By giving away a clarinet - that truth be told I hated anyway - by allowing myself to have “less” I fell into meaningful conversation with a complete stranger and fellow traveler on this journey we call life. This story is completely true by the way. Although for full disclosure I could point out that once we got into conversation I sailed right past my destination to keep listening. And without the clarinet event I would not have been on the GO train at all that day - I would have driven. But in any case the whole event challenged me to rethink what it is we need to have in order to do meaningful ministry. And yes, in that particular case, having a clarinet in my basement was helpful. Perhaps Jesus should have instructed his disciples, “Take no money and no food, but take a collection of musical instruments to give away.” I wonder how that would have worked.

But when I come to think about it, I had a fairly nice ministry on the GO trains in general. I spoke with many people over the years about their life struggles on these green and white coaches. I spoke with numerous people about their divorces or their struggles with cancer. I remember providing pastoral care to GO staff after a passenger was killed by an accident at Union Station. To me, GO trains are part of sacred space. And all you need is a Presto Card, an open mind, and a willingness to engage.

I'm also reminded of the many people I visited with over the years in jail. For 6 years, I made weekly visits at the Toronto West Detention Centre. And in that highly conflicted environment, I learned the power of weakness. I was very fortunate to start visiting with inmates after the “good old days” were over. In the old days, chaplains would sometimes give gifts to inmates. Like cigarettes, or offering to write letters to a judge that said, “Deep down, Johnny really is a good person”. Or providing connections with the outside world. But by the time I got into prison ministry, that was all over. Chaplains (at least volunteer chaplains) were not able to give away anything at all. Except our time, our caring, our listening, our love.

And by having nothing physical to give away, visits were focused on important issues. Like relationships and transformation. I never once had to wonder if an inmate only talked to me because I gave him cigarettes, for example. And I learned that if you have nothing to give but your time and your presence, you just might be giving someone something very valuable. Something that they perhaps have never had before.

I started visiting in jail as part of a “field education” course when I was at seminary. So for the first 8 months I had a supervisor with whom I would speak weekly. And I remember my supervisor once asked me what I said to inmates at the end of my visits. I told him that most visits ended by my telling the person I would try to see them next week. And I usually did see the person the following week, barring any lockdowns or other realities of life inside a correctional facility. My supervisor responded, “So, you tell people you will come back, and then you come back.” I looked at him as if he was crazy. He looked at me as if I was missing the point (which I was). He said, making and then keeping a promise is a huge deal to most of the people I visit with because they really do not expect that. Just keeping your promise can be a real ministry to some people.

Imagine that. That making and keeping a promise - something I assume most of us completely take for granted - can be a meaningful form of engagement and ministry. Now there’s a ministry that requires no money, no training, no education, nothing except authentic presence and caring.

So perhaps that’s one reason that Jesus instructed the disciples to take nothing physical with them. So that they could not give anything away. So that all that the disciples would have to give away would be their time, their caring, their listening, their love. The disciples would not be able to “fix” problems by writing a cheque. But instead would have to simply offer themselves to others. It’s almost as if Jesus understood that healing comes from being in authentic relationship with others. And how did that work out? In Mark it says, “They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.” The strategy worked. Perhaps the strategy still works today.

God's power is made perfect in our weakness. Amazing words. Incredible words. Wonderful words. The only question, really, is ... how on earth can we live up to those words? Or how can we NOT live up to those words if we try? A ministry of weakness does not require more money or a larger congregation, or more energy. Surely we have all the weakness we need, don't we? Perhaps instead of just complaining about what we do not have, we need to embrace who we are. We have enough. We are enough.

One person whose whole ministry was based on weakness was Jean Vanier. His

approach to Christian living was to live in community with people who suffered from mental challenges. And by living that way, he embraced - actually, he lived - the life of Jesus. He spent many years at the L'arche community in Richmond hill, just up the road from where Marjorie and I used to live. In Vanier's own words: "I am struck by how sharing our weakness and difficulties is more nourishing to others than sharing our qualities and successes."

But Vanier's vision surpassed that. Vanier said, "In the end, the most important thing is not to do things for people who are poor and in distress, but to enter into relationship with them, to be with them and help them find confidence in themselves and discover their own gifts. ... The promise of Jesus is to help us discover that the poor are a source of life and not just objects of our charity."

We are not invited to become weak in order to help others. We are invited to acknowledge the weakness we already have, to help ourselves and others. To help ourselves embrace our own humanity at its most profound and meaningful levels. Isn't that what we imagine when we say that "Jesus was fully human"?

Intentional weakness is a strength. Intentional weakness is something we can all choose to do. Embrace your own weakness so that you - like Jesus - can become fully human. The kingdom of God is here and is yet coming. But the kingdom of God does not come in strength, it comes in weakness. And we can all participate in that.

God is still speaking. Keep listening. Keep acting. Keep loving.

Amen.