

Holy Weakness: Loving Ourselves as God Loves Us

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I'd like to continue focus our attention, and our hearts, on our weaknesses—some of which we might call sin, those limitations that prevent us from living as faithful children of God. The point of our focus is not to do a self-scouring. The point is to recognize that in our weakness, we are finally ready and able to encounter God.

Spiritual theologian Wendy Wright writes about her own spiritual journey and trying to come to terms with her own weaknesses and sinfulness. And what prompted her on the journey was reading some of the saints (Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal), who would write about loving their weaknesses, their lowliness. She says that she found that concept hard to take. Like most of us—at least it is true for me—she had spent much of her life struggling against her weaknesses and sinfulness, and the thought of loving that part of herself was strange.

Wendy Wright says that she had to “let it ripen in her prayer.” And in time, as she approached mid-life, as she struggled to live into her own limitations, those pesky area of brokenness and blindness that seem to always be there, she realized that her task was not so much to try to eliminate that brokenness, since she clearly was not able to, although she continued to work on them. The task, she writes, was to recognize these limitations and to accept them. And more: to love those parts of herself that she dreads ever being made public. As she let it unfold as an experience of self-revelation in prayer, she says that she began to take delight in it.

“To love our ‘lowliness’ (abjections) is to love ourselves as we are loved, in our wholeness. It is to have compassion on ourselves. It is to begin to see that the true place of transformation is not in our gifts but in our weakness. It is to know ourselves as wounded yet beloved and thus to begin to know each other most truly. For it is not in our strengths that we find one another, it is in our lack. For in our need we call each other forth. To love our ‘lowliness or weaknesses’ (abjections) is to shatter the images of self-perfection we would like to project. It is thus to enter into the mystery of loving all that is human and from there to begin to love all humans more truly.”

Are you able to identify with what Wright has written? She has tried to eliminate her weakness/her sin and has failed, over and over again. I can relate to that. In those times of life where new resolutions are called for—such as New Year's Day and the beginning of Lent—I find myself making the same resolutions over and over again. I have some core issues that I have simply made a disappointing lack of progress in changing. No need to go to confession—I'll just send the tape from last time. Does that sound familiar?

What is it that we believe about our sin and God? We believe that God loves us in our sinfulness. That God loves us in our weakness. That the God who sees us, as one friend puts it, “all the way in,” behind the mask, beneath the public persona, beneath the truth that we hesitate to even acknowledge to ourselves, God simply and completely loves us.

When we tell the story of our weakness in that context, then the story is not one of guilt and despair, but of hope and joy. Our weakness is the ground of a new relationship with God. As Wendy Wright writes, these sins, these weaknesses, are the place where we encounter God. This is the place where we are able to know the compassion of God. It is this weakness that is the clay that the Potter uses to form a new and beautiful creation.

By standing on our weakness, we place ourselves into the presence of God. It is in our weakness that we are able to know, truly know, the love of God. It is in our sinfulness and weakness that the transforming love of God becomes ours. It is our weakness that God finds entry into our hearts. For no other reason than that, we need to embrace our weakness.

When we are able to replace self-condemnation with self-compassion, then we have begun to know the love of God. When we can love our weakness, we are united with the God who loves us in our weakness. And, as Wendy Wright says, when we are able to love ourselves as God does, to love the self that is beneath our self-projection, then we have entered into the mystery of love and begin to love all that is human—and so can begin to love other humans more truly.

Loving our weakness is not to pretend that they aren't weaknesses. It is not to deny or to rationalize our sinfulness away. To love our weakness is to be united with the God who loves us as we are, before we become the person that we desire to be.

How do we get there? Can we really believe that? I believe that we can come to love our weakness only when we truly believe that God loves our weakness first. As much as we talk about that belief, we sometimes have difficulty believing it at the deepest level of ourselves. It can roll off our tongues: we are saved by Jesus; our sins are forgiven by Jesus on the cross; our sins are washed away by the Blood of Jesus. And we believe it; none of us would ever say anything to contrary. But to really believe it is to have our hearts changed: to have our hearts, which are hardened to ourselves, changed.

Let's remember some stories of God's history with us and see if it can help us believe.

As you read the stories in the Scriptures of God's interaction with humankind, we can see that God has a deep bias for those who are weak and powerless. As the plan of God unfolds over the millennia, we see God choosing over and over again the least likely, the most weak and incapable partners to do his work.

We can read the story of Abraham, an absolute nobody whom God chose to be the Father of his people. Moses was a murderer, and yet he was the one chosen to be the liberator of God's people from slavery in Egypt. We have Jeremiah chosen to be a prophet even though he was too young and uneducated. Jonah had to be run down and dragged, kicking and screaming, to his vocation as a prophet.

God reveals that he has no respect for the cultural bias promised to the eldest son. God chose Jacob over his older and more deserving brother Esau, even though Jacob was shifty and dishonest. Remember the youngest son Joseph, who was abused by his jealous and petty older siblings and sold into slavery- but that in no way hinders God from using Joseph in his plan. And David, again the youngest, was thought to be of such low worth that Jesse doesn't even think to let him meet the prophet Samuel. Yet God finds him and through Samuel anoints him king. And in the continued story of David, a powerless young boy who overcomes the mighty giant Goliath becomes the archetypal story of how God turns power and powerlessness upside down.

It is hard to remember all the "barren women" who give birth with the help of God. An elderly Sarah gives birth to Isaac; Rachel, the wife of Jacob, has her "womb opened by God" and she gives birth to Joseph. The prayers of the barren Hannah are heard by God and she gives birth to Samuel.

Election by God has nothing to do with worthiness. It is about usability and that usability is found in the weakness of the person being chosen to assist God in the unfolding of his plan.

And the most famous of all is the handmaiden, Mary. She recognizes her lowliness and with her "fiat" (so be it), she becomes the model for all who seek to faithfully contribute their lives to the plan and will of God. She does that by accepting and acknowledging her lowliness. With that she becomes the ultimate useful one, completely available to God.

These are God's favorites: the sinners, the lepers, the barren, the forgotten sons, the outsiders; these are the ones who are most available to God and whom God uses to work his plan of salvation.

This is a lesson that is hard for us to learn, as it was hard for the apostles (lowly men) whom Jesus called. Eventually they understood, but it was a lesson that they had to learn by being confronted with their own weakness and limitations.

Paul came to boast of his weakness: *I will not boast, except about my weakness.* [This was the first humble brag.] *Although if I should wish to boast, I would not be foolish, for I would be telling the truth. But I refrain, so that no one may think more of me than what he sees in me and hears from me because of the abundance of the revelation. Therefore, that I might not become too elated, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, an angel of Satan, to beat me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I begged the*

Lord about this, that it might leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." I will, rather, boast most gladly of my weaknesses in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me. Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor: 12).

Can we be like Paul, able to thank God and boast about our weaknesses, because that is what makes us usable to God and available to God, because that is when the power of God is revealed through us?

When were the times in your life when you felt closest to God, or felt that your relationship with God matured? Was it during times of triumph and joy, or during times of stress and difficulty and failure? As I take inventory and remember my own journey with God, I can see how spiritual growth and maturation occurred in those times when my weakness and powerlessness were exposed.

- I grew much more—my relationship with God was transformed more profoundly—during the painful and disappointing months following a decision to delay my ordination, than I did during the eventual celebration of my ordination. (No one grows closer to God while taking a victory lap.)
- I remember being a young hospital chaplain, sitting with people who were dying and forced to come to terms with my own mortality. It was difficult, but today I remember that as a time of significant growth and maturing in my relationship with God.
- I remember struggling to understand the death of my 35-year-old brother, who left a widow and five young children and suffering the powerlessness of knowing there was nothing that I could do to make that better. For me, as for for many, the pain and weakness of grief opens the heart, opens the door to a deepening in our relationships with God.

These hard times that I experienced, I can now remember as times of growth, times when a tested faith grew stronger. How about you? What have been the times of growth for you? Was being confronted by the truth of your vulnerability and weakness a part of your story?

Boasting about our weakness, embracing and loving ourselves in our weakness, doesn't mean that we have to pursue penitential practices or embrace the life of an ascetic. We don't have to go looking for this. No: our weaknesses, our powerlessness, they are exposed as truth by our life. We don't have to go looking to be powerless and weak: that truth finds us. We simply need to allow the truth to touch us and not allow our false selves to fight and deny it. And it is in those moments of truth revealed that we can experience greater intimacy with God. And in hindsight, later—sometimes much later—we can give thanks to God for how the revelation of our weakness also revealed the all-powerful and unconditional love that God gives us.

During Holy Week, be aware of the pattern that we see in Jesus's life, because it is a pattern for us all to follow:

- The triumph of Palm Sunday: a time of jubilation that fades away fast.
- Thursday: The agony in the garden and the temptation to not accept weakness and vulnerability. The desire to deny that this is a necessary part of a faithful life.
- Friday: Jesus' powerlessness is revealed and in that abject weakness he becomes completely available to God and God's plan.
- Saturday: Being in the tomb of uncertainty and confusion; what in God's name is happening to me? Where is God in all that is happening?
- Easter: the joyful revelation and fulfillment of God's plan.

In Jesus and the events of this week we can see the pattern of our own spiritual growth. I invite you to be aware of this pattern as it unfolds during the week. Use the awareness to enter in to a deeper union with a God who chose to be just as human and weak as us.

For reflection: Look within and embrace the truth of your life; the truth of your humanness. Courageously look within and acknowledge your weakness/powerlessness. But instead of feeling sorrow or guilt (of getting stuck there), or instead of denying it and asking God to make it go away, I invite you to take it to prayer and ask God: Is this place, this place of my vulnerability and weakness, is this where you want to meet me and embrace me?