

## “THE POWER OF WEAKNESS”

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2 COR. 12. 1 – 10

Who are your heroes? Who exemplifies the noblest of what it means to be human? Super-athletes? Movie stars? Musicians like Taylor Swift? Millionaires? Those “stars” whose lives chart the emotional temperament of our societies?

During my university years, I heard a sermon that I have never forgotten—which began with that question. It was a simple morning chapel service, led by one of the professors of religion—E. Graham Waring—whom I admired, not only for the greatness of his mind but above all for the deep compassion of his heart.

His sermon on that spring morning was on a passage from 2 Corinthians—the text we heard this evening where the apostle Paul pivots from the classic images of heroism that dominated Greek and Roman cultures. Images of athletes and warriors, powerful public figures and statesmen, political movers and shakers, all of whom reveled in power for self-aggrandizement. And then we come upon the startling contrast in the words of Paul: “On my behalf, I will not boast, except of my weakness.”

The message of Dr. Waring’s sermon was as simple as it was deep—and, apparently, unforgettable since I heard it almost half a century ago: the Christian image of greatness had nothing to do with the culture of heroism that dominated Greco-Roman society. It was poignantly counter-cultural. It privileged service over self-achievement, community over individualism, sacrifice over success. And yet it was truer to the greatness of what it means to be human.

*Power, perfection; privilege:* These are the gold-standards of societies, like that of ancient Rome, which continue to capture us. They thrive on competition.

They cater to productivity and profit, the driving engines of capitalism—which has no inner compass of its own, no countervailing forces, no edifying social values, driven as it is—as Marx put it in his *Communist Manifest* (1848)—by what he called “naked self-interest.” Which is death of true community. The end of true human dignity. A threat to ways of living that are respectful of the land and all its living creatures and forces. And, finally, a refusal of the worth of each individual whose dignity rest within the embrace of that human- and earth-community.

This zeal is what fires the lie of the “*Make America Great Again*” movement in the United States—perhaps you know, as Australians, your own version of it—rooted as it is in the false gospel of white power, of colonial conquest, driven by the destructive power of “naked self-interest.” Which is finally an obedience only to power, perfection, and privilege.

What will happen when we allow these pressures to shape us, when we enable them—and we do this if we do not resist them—we give in to a strength that is both unnatural and unsocial? No, “anti-social”? We must be clear about this: such pressures allow no dignity to building up—whether in terms of a community or a nation. They give no sanction to the true virtues of patience, presence, and promise. They leave us in the vulnerable position of the powerful prevailing over the weak, the arrogant over the broken, the strong over the vulnerable. This is the false gospel of our world which seems bent on choosing self over other, satisfaction over service—and ultimately death over life.

All of this is a world—literally—away from the message of Jesus, which was that “the kingdom of God” belongs to children, that the “last shall be first,” convictions that elevated generosity over self-interest, communitarian concerns over individualism—all rooted in his claim that “whoever would be great among you must be a slave.” This is the same whom the apostle Paul said: “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though in the form of God, did not count equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (Phil. 2. 5ff.).

The power of weakness. The truth of “emptying”—of privilege, of status, of success. Which is to say: the power of service. The privileging of the “other” over the interests of the self. The care for community over “naked self-interest.”

All things that cut against the grain of the economic and political culture that shapes us.

Now, let me be clear about one truth: the outward culture of all this, the one in which we live, is patently untrue. It is a false construction rooted in things inimical to the way of Jesus. It privileges efficiency over compassion.

Productivity over creativity. Power over vulnerability. Popularity over truth. All these are lies. And it encourages us to imagine that strength might enable us to escape the limitations of our nature—which is rooted in a beauty we receive as *gift*, not one we create through our intentions. Or inherit through our social privilege. Or magnify through our actions.

In one of his early “Talks of Instruction,” Meister Eckhart reminds us that “we must train ourselves *not to seek or strive for our own interests in anything, but rather to find and to grasp God in all things*. For God does not give us anything in order that we should enjoy its possession and rest content with it, nor has God ever done so. All the gifts which God has ever granted us, in heaven or on earth, were made solely in order to be able to give us the *one* gift, which is God’s self.” (Oliver Davies, ed., *Meister Eckhart: Selected Writings*, p. 40)

Julian of Norwich was after the same truth when she prayed, “God, of your goodness, give us yourself, for you are enough for us. And I can ask for nothing which is less that can fully worship you. And if I ask for anything that is less than you, I am ever in need. For only in you do I have everything.” (see Ch. 5 of the “Long Text” of her *Revelation of Love*).

You. . .are. . .enough. . .for. . .me. “To grasp God. . .in all things.” In weakness. In sickness. In loss. In suffering. These are among the most subversive, and constructive, words we might hear in our day. These invite us to journey on the path of Jesus, that “wayless way” of compassion and vulnerable love.

The apostle Paul put it this way: when he asked God to deliver him from his suffering, God addressed him with these words: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

What does this mean for you?

For your community?

For your nation?

For humanity?

For the creatures and resources of this imperiled Earth?

Whatever else it might mean, it surely means this: an unmasking the idolatry of power. A refusal of the illusion of perfection. A renunciation of the vanity of privilege.

This vision calls us to a radical path, what the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart announced when he affirmed that “we must train ourselves *not to seek or strive for our own interests in anything, but rather to find and to grasp God in all things.*” For, as he later put it, “the real possession of God is to be found in the heart, in an inner motion of the spirit toward God and striving for God, and not just in thinking about God always and in the same way” (ibid., p. 10).

Eckhart was so right about this: we cannot resist the false lure of power unless we discover a different way, one rooted “in the heart, in an inner motion of the spirit toward God.” By this Eckhart meant: choose life. Make yourself empty enough to have space for the inner presence of love. Turn from the need for power, control, or outward certainty. Renounce the alluring but ultimately disappointing quest for “self-fulfillment.” Refuse that cheap gospel of success.

In a rendition of this truth, I gave voice to Eckhart’s conviction like this—in a poem I entitled “You Are a Construction Zone”:

Yes, you, here and now in this one  
wild and precious life of yours,  
you are always becoming new,  
for God is in all that is, always  
making all things new—even you.

To experience this, stop thinking  
about outward things in your life,  
which worry or confuse you,  
and turn to that innermost part of  
your soul, with all its radiance,  
for it is there that God is ever  
creating within you.

Only when you believe this  
will you find it, and only when  
you find this will you believe.

(“You Are a Construction Zone” from Mark S. Burrows and Jon M. Sweeney, *Meister Eckhart’s Book of Darkness and Light. Meditations on the Path of the Wayless Way* [Hampton Roads, 2023])

So: “stop thinking / about outward things in your life / which worry and confuse.” Consider that pearl of great price—that is your soul. Consider the gift that is your life—singular, distinctive, and beautiful. And remember that “You, God, are enough for me.” And: “. . . [God’s] grace is sufficient for you, for [God’s] power is made perfect in weakness.” What might this invite of you? Of us? To dwell in the gift that we *are*—regardless of what we *have* in terms of privilege or wealth or status. The gospel of freedom invites us to “the more gladly boast of [our] weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon [us]. . . for when [we are] weak, then [we are] strong” (2 Cor. 2. 9 – 10).

*Only when you believe this  
will you find it, and only when  
you find this will you believe.*