

The Gospel and Emotional Health

Live in Brokenness and Vulnerability

2 Cor 4.5-7, 12.6-10; 1 Timothy 1.15-17; James 1.9-10; Isaiah 66.1-2
May 28, 2023

2 Corinthians 4.5-7 For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. ⁷ But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves.

12.6-10 For if I do wish to boast I shall not be foolish, for I shall be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one may credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me. ⁷ And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me-- to keep me from exalting myself! ⁸ Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. ⁹ And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰ Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

1 Timothy 1.15-17 It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. ¹⁶ And yet for this reason I found mercy, in order that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience, as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life. ¹⁷ Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

James 1.9-10 But let the brother of humble circumstances glory in his high position; ¹⁰ and let the rich man glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away.... ^{2:5} Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?

Isaiah 66.1-2 Thus says the LORD, "Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest? ² "For My hand made all these things, thus all these things came into being," declares the LORD. "But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word."

The titles for this part of the series are taken from chapter headings of Peter Scazzero's book *The Emotionally Healthy Church*. I've noticed some on the bookshelves... it may be back there or check out other books AND get a reading list for summer reading.

The book's premise is that any *apparent* spiritual maturity that isn't attended by true emotional maturity is not what it appears to be. True spiritual maturity is always joined to emotional maturity.

We've looked at the fact that spiritually and emotionally healthy people: 1) Look Beneath the Surface

(remember the shark fin – the speck I see in your eye and the log I don't see in my own eye) and 2) Face the Power of the Past – (last week) the influence of our upbringing, the good and bad we inherit from our parents and the joy of having a perfect Father.

Today, a third quality in the kind of emotional wellbeing that always accompanies true spiritual maturity i.e., 3) Live in Brokenness and Vulnerability. In the spiritually and emotionally healthy person, there's a freedom from that natural defensiveness, from aversion to criticism, insecurity and hypersensitivity that most often accompanies our human, fallen condition.

We'll see that the Apostle Paul enjoyed that kind of inner liberty AND he also saw its absence in some of the young Christians he loved and served as Christianity was being established in the ancient world. Let's look at:

#1 – A Dead Mindset Facing a Weak Apostle

#2 – A New Rationale to Redirect Boasting

#3 – The Practice of Upside-down Boasting

Ironically, spiritual, religious, moral people are often more defensive than openly immoral people because moral people have standards. They disapprove of people who break the standards AND they don't want anyone to disapprove of them and that's one reason they attempt to follow the rules. "People who break the rules lose respect and I don't want to lose respect." They believe in things like helping the needy or preserving family values and doing justice, honesty, sexual integrity, hard work etc.

SO religious and morally concerned types get ...concerned when these standards aren't upheld. They're alert to improprieties and immoral trends in society. They notice others (e.g., coworkers or neighbors) who are ne'er-do-wells, who sleep around and don't recycle or don't use their turn-signal or who let their dogs bark or...dress immodestly.

And spiritual religious people favor positive peer pressure, that the community monitors itself and rewards conformity.

So...moral and spiritual types may remain "concerned" ...which is a word WE use for ticked-off. And people sort of smell this air of "concern" which THEY call "anger" or "self-righteousness" or a "chip on his shoulder". And I do agree with the old writer Thomas Watson who said that zeal is a mixture of love and anger – it's not that all anger is bad...if you see someone torturing an animal or spray painting graffiti, you should be angry... but looking beneath the surface we find – when we are, as Jesus Christ taught, properly self-suspicious – we should be at least open to the possibility that our righteous indignation is often more like self-righteousness and fear or insecurity.

The Apostle Paul was in trouble. Corinth was a planned community, a recent urban-planning project built on this beautiful strip of land (Aegean Sea). The government put out word that jobs and opportunities would be there. Artisans and entrepreneurs – the best and brightest came from all over the world. Paul was there about a year and a half and even in that flashy, young, spicy resort town (*a lot like South Florida!*) God raised up a church... a real Christian congregation... with real big problems. And Paul helped them work through their issues.

And then Paul went away and... slowly... a kind of campaign arose... “Paul’s gone and ... I guess he got all he wanted out of us!” “Wow!...See ya!”... “I heard he’s changed his message.” “Well for me, I always preferred the sermons of Peter (he’s a real Apostle)” “Well, I think if this Paul ever comes back here, we should require a resume’ or at least some reference letters (2Cor 3.1-3) ...Right?” “Yeah!!”

So, Paul is forced to do what he really hates to do and that is to defend himself. And he writes this letter back to that young church, God’s alternative City within the city of Corinth, the new society. He says, “Look...you’re putting me in a situation where I can’t win because to defend myself is a kind of self-negating proposition.”

In Ch. 11 Paul refers to it as being insane – “You want me to boast in my qualifications, but that kind of boasting is the very thing Christianity most vigorously opposes! ...You want me to say how much I’ve suffered for the faith, how much experience I have, how I’ve had true spiritual and mystical experiences, how successful and competent I’ve been – sadly – that’s the kind of stuff that really impresses you people – but I hate to do it because it denies the whole point of my message – you’re making me insane.”

Now – what is Paul facing? It’s not just that he wants job-security or even that he’s trying to salvage his reputation. He’s grieved that this “outpost of heaven” this church, this branch of God’s new society is shriveling into the same old, dead mindset that characterized the fallen world: the idea that we have to save and defend ourselves. It’s all up to you!

Every time we walk into a room, we have to instantly size up the competition and establish a position, a fortress of qualifications. You have to let people see that YOU BELONG HERE! Impress people, become known as a somebody – “So, Joe, what do you do?.. Well, Lisa, it sounds like you’ve really travelled to a lot of exotic places...” We have to dress for success...never let ‘em see you sweat...put your best foot forward...play to your strengths...you never get a second chance to make a first impression! Spin it! Every room is a courtroom and every person a judge and every group a jury...and every situation culminates in a verdict. It’s all up to you to present the evidence – somehow to prove yourself without sounding like a “*Mr. Know-it-all*” ... or arrogant.

Long ago I read a short story I never forgot. It’s called “The Handler” (by Damon Knight). The scene is swanky bar and restaurant. It’s a cast party. All the writers are there and the make-up people and the sound and lighting and props people. The understudies are there and the minor parts in the production. And then...with a beautiful woman hanging from each arm...in comes the guest of honor...the star... heads start to turn. “Hey, it’s Pete! ...Pete!...Pete!”

“Hey someone give him a drink!” Immediately, he has a martini.

He strides up to the bar and people make way...A big tall, muscular guy with thick black hair and a strong square jaw...bright white perfect teeth... (like Dwayne “*The Rock*” Johnson but with great hair!) He begins to talk and it’s like the whole room is fixated on him... He jokes...and everyone laughs... He moves and everyone shifts...he punches a guy in the arm...kisses all the women...calls them “Hey, Doll!” “Pete, you really knocked ‘em dead tonight! (“Yeah great job, Pete!!..Pete..Pete..!!”)

And then Pete sort of stretches himself over the bar...and there’s this odd movement and the colossal back of his jacket opens and out climbs this sweaty little man about 4 feet tall – he looks like Danny DiVito (soiled tank-

top and shiny face a little dirty...wipes his face with a handkerchief).

Meanwhile the party goes on but everyone's looking elsewhere... the lead women move away...and the awkward, overheated short man asks for a beer; he has to ask twice. Bartender says, "Huh? Oh yeah, sure thing Fred...just a minute." Then he tries to strike up a conversation with a young stagehand, but the kid says, "Uh sorry, Fred, I gotta talk to Cindy before she leaves." So Fred says to the bartender, "Phew...sure is hot in there"... "What's that? Oh, uh huh...yeah I bet!...Hey Fred, you uh, done with that beer...maybe it's time...you know.."

"Yeah...I guess you're right." He puts down his glass and climbs back inside. The back of the jacket shuts and... Pete stands up straight and roars, "Hey! Are we at a cast party or a funeral?" Immediately, the women return and the stagehand shouts "Pete, tell us what you were thinking when Judy forgot her line!" And as Pete tells the story everyone's captivated.

The point of the story is that each of us has an outward persona and... a handler (the real ME) ...an insecure, weak, sweaty, tired inner self and we do all we can NOT to let that that person out...to keep him hidden under a front that has worked – the happy dad...the church worker...the preacher...the successful professional woman... the smiling witty cool guy...the staunch moral zealot out to make the world safe for democracy...whatever your "Pete" is. (The imposter/front behind whom you hide.)

But for the Apostle Paul, he would rather do away with his Pete – he would like to be Fred...He's happy to expose his weaknesses. He knows that Jesus Christ loves the real man, the inner man, the one we're afraid to let others see. The sweaty insecure person who you cover and hide with the fig leaves of your achievements or your hardships... ("I've really suffered!") your clever jokes and qualifications.

See, your Pete is the personality you display to get people to respect you or like you or to get people to leave you alone...it can be a victim persona...an experienced persona...a happy face... a well-read persona...a doctrinally correct... a competent persona...a ripped/buff persona...a joker...a ditzy party-girl. Whatever you boast in...glory in.

But Paul's saying, "In the NEW way – the *Gospel* way – my real importance comes NOT from my ability to impress you but from the fact that God the Creator of the Universe is elated with me (Zeph 3.17) – and because HE'S my defender in Jesus Christ, I'm learning to put down my façade.

And now when you see my weakness...it becomes an opportunity for Him to demonstrate His strength. When I am weak, I am strong... If you think I'm weak and nothing special...it's ok (even good) that you see that, because it reminds you and me that it's not about me and my strength: I'm not preaching myself but Christ Jesus as Lord.

If you look at the clay pot that I am and think, "What's up with that? He's not rich or handsome or cool or particularly interesting...or even in the best shape..." Paul's saying, "I know: that's the point! The container is plain... fragile... even breakable and if you look close... it's broken – but inside the cracked pot, a beautiful light, a radiance: *the light of the glory of God in the face of Christ*... And the weakness of the container, the cracks, when they're not covered by a "Pete persona" ...God's light spills out... and others benefit from the light that comes out of the brokenness!"

Paul says, "Look I could find stuff to boast about...but I'd rather tell you about my flaws and cracks and defects.

In fact, to keep me from boasting in my qualifications (Phil 3!), the Lord allowed me to be afflicted (disabled...messed up...cracked)...*'a thorn in the flesh'* And even though I prayed God to remove it (3x!) God said to me, *'My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is seen in your weakness!'*"

My disappointments are a gift...I wanted to get married but never did (turns out it was a gift to make me more dependent on God's grace)...I was never able to complete that degree program and probably never will (turns out it was a gift to make me more dependent on God's grace)... a bad background ...a difficult family member ...a temptation that's perpetual... a really hard marriage ...a broken friendship... a struggle with anger or shyness or fear. My thorn/weakness is an opportunity for His strength. See? The poor and the weak are advantaged in this kingdom: they're free from the damning illusion of self-sufficiency.

Now a few practical points on how to live out this new outlook on weakness (FOUR avenues it opens): 1) See the boast-worthiness of the Cross of Jesus Christ. Let it tell your story. It tells that you are very messed up...so much that only the death of the God-Man could remedy your situation. If your strength or goodness were sufficient then Jesus Christ would not have had to die for you. But He DID (if you believe the Gospel, you know that!) and that is something worth boasting about. The more you learn to DO that, the freer you'll BE from a persona...façade.

2) Know that God delights in this new way. God could look at the Universe (as many stars as there are grains of sand – fascinating and astounding!!) You'd think God would really like looking at it all but Isaiah wrote that God would rather look at His children repenting and humble and boasting in Him – *"to this one I will look - him who is humble and contrite of spirit and who trembles at my word."* See, we don't have to hide our weakness from God – He loves when we acknowledge it (He'd rather look at that than the stars!)

3) Learn to rejoice in your disabilities. Don't seek out a disability and if you can get rid of one, DO. (Paul prayed three times!) But if it remains, see it as God's gift to keep you clear on the real source of joy and fulfillment and significance...Your weakness keeps telling you that the answer is grace (*"My grace is what you really need!"*)

4) Last – befriend people and learn to share your weaknesses with them. I have had older brothers in this congregation share real struggles with me (climb out of their Pete suit and get weak with me). So let the light shine out of the cracks in your clay pot life – I have been so strengthened by that... Why do we try so hard to hide our failings and struggles and weaknesses from each other?...We're stealing glory from God and withholding real help from each other...Learn the art of appropriate vulnerability! Paul referred to himself as the chief of sinners and THEN he tells Timothy to follow his example – I think he means the example of being open about one's sin?

I can't help thinking that this is a huge untapped resource for sharing the Good News with non-Christians too. If we'd be more open about our weakness and need (less focused on appearing good) maybe *"they"* would stick around to hear about Jesus Christ's strength and beauty and grace.

Do you know the Japanese art called KINTSUGI? It's an art form for repairing broken ceramics by filling the cracks in pottery with lacquer infused or mixed with powdered gold. It's also a kind of philosophy that sees wear and tear and cracks and repair as part of the history of an object, rather than something to disguise. The gold both accentuates the cracks AND somehow beautifies the pottery. Kintsugi.

The gospel enables and promotes the kintsugi life. Don't let your imposter Pete rob you of showing your flaws – learn the appropriate vulnerability that grace makes possible for the good of others and the glory of God – the practice of upside-down boasting!

QUOTES

People say I'm the life of the party
 Because I tell a joke or two
 Although I might be laughing loud and hearty
 Deep inside I'm blue
 So take a good look at my face
 You'll see my smile looks out of place

 If you look closer, it's easy to trace
 The tracks of my tears

– Smokey Robinson, “The Tracks of My Tears” (from the 1965 album *Going to a Go-Go* by The Miracles)

...and "now," he said, as the room quieted a little, people flushed and sore-throated with enthusiasm, "I want you to meet my handler."

The room fell silent. The big man looked thoughtful and startled, as if he had had a sudden pain. Then he stopped moving. He sat without breathing or blinking his eyes. After a moment there was a jerky motion behind him. The girl who was sitting on the arm of the chair got up and moved away. The big man's dinner jacket split open in the back, and a little man climbed out. Damon Knight *THE HANDLER* by

– Damon Knight; “The Handler” (a short story, 1960)

Imposters are preoccupied with acceptance and approval. Because of their suffocating need to please others, they cannot say no with the same confidence with which they say yes. And so they overextend themselves in people, projects and causes, motivated not by personal commitment but by the fear of not living up to others' expectations.

When we accept the truth of what we really are and surrender it to Jesus Christ, we are enveloped in peace, whether or not we feel ourselves to be at peace. By that I mean the peace that passes understanding is not a subjective sensation of peace; if we are in Christ, we are in peace even when we feel no peace. With a graciousness and an understanding of human weakness that only God can exhibit, Jesus liberates us from alienation and self-condemnation and offers each of us a new possibility. He is the Savior who saves us from ourselves. His word is freedom.

– Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging* (1994; pp 30,42)