

# The Grace in Weakness

*“For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom,  
and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.” 1 Cor. 1:25*

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Let us pray: Gracious and loving God, who chose what is foolish to shame the wise and what is weak to shame the strong, save us from the vanities of this world and the conceits of our own minds, so that we might find grace in weakness and become fools for your love's sake. In Jesus' name. Amen.

That prayer, of course, is based upon today's epistle lesson, in which St. Paul reminds us that what the world perceives to be weakness and foolishness is often a sign of God's grace.

I will always associate St. Paul's words with a story from my days as a middle school chaplain. There was a young boy—I'll call him Jimmy—who was then in seventh grade and one of my few students who seemed genuinely interested in chapel. Jimmy often helped me with worship in quiet ways—as an acolyte, or usher, or crucifer—but his real dream was to stand up in front of everyone and proudly and articulately read one of the lessons. The trouble was that Jimmy had a bit of a stutter; and for that reason, he was mortified about speaking in public, and always declined to serve as a reader, much as he wanted to.

I felt torn about the issue, because on the one hand, I certainly never wanted to put Jimmy in a position of embarrassment; yet, on the other, I desperately wanted to help him overcome his fear so that he could fulfill his deep desire to read the Scriptures aloud with clarity and confidence. Uncertain how to proceed, one day over lunch in the faculty room, I sought the advice of a friend and colleague, Sarah, who also happened to be Jimmy's history teacher.

“I have a thought,” Sarah said. “I'm currently doing a unit on World War II and my intention next week is to show the class the (then-recently released) movie, *The King's Speech*, which,” Sarah said, “may make enough of an impression on Jimmy to inspire him to confront his fears about his speaking challenges and to take a risk.”

*The King's Speech*, as you may remember, is a movie about King George VI, known to his family as "Bertie," who had imperial leadership thrust upon him quite unexpectedly. The second son of George V, Bertie was a shy and awkward boy, in contrast to his older brother, Edward, who was debonair, confident, and handsome. Everyone always assumed Edward would become the future king, not only because he was older and therefore next in line to the throne, but also because he simply seemed more fit to be king.

Moreover, little Bertie suffered from one other difficulty that posed an obstacle to becoming king: like little Jimmy, Bertie stammered badly. In public settings, Bertie would become so utterly afraid to speak that he could not put two words together without stumbling. Bertie had all the wealth in the world, all the power of nobility, all the privileges that come with royalty, and yet none of this did him any good because he could not do the one thing people expect of a future king: to speak with eloquence and authority.

And then Bertie's greatest fear comes to pass: upon the death of his father, George V, Bertie's older brother, Edward, infamously abdicates the throne, and Bertie is forced to become king against his wishes. And not only that, but Bertie takes the throne near the outbreak of WWII, at a time when the British people desperately need confident and articulate leadership, which only adds to Bertie's overwhelming sense of panic.

The heart of the movie is about how Bertie faces the demon of his stuttering through an unlikely relationship with an eccentric, failed actor, who has made a modest reputation working as a speech therapist. For the rest of the movie, we watch these two men, from dramatically different backgrounds, come to know, and trust, and help one another, so that they might together overcome the fear that underlies the King's stuttering. Which, in time, they do.

So, to return to my middle school story: Sarah showed the movie to her eighth-grade history class, and it did indeed make the expected impression upon Jimmy. Seeing how he was affected by the film, Sarah, to her great credit, gently took him aside after class and offered to coach Jimmy so that he might be able to fulfill his dream of reading in chapel.

And so, a few weeks later, Jimmy stepped up to the lectern, and in front of all the school, read a lesson from Scripture. His reading was by no means perfect; there were some stumbles and halts along the way. But everything else

about that moment was perfect—including especially how Jimmy’s words were received.

As I looked out at all the students as they listened to Jimmy speak, I could see in their faces that they knew how high the stakes were for him. Like me, they were hanging breathlessly on Jimmy’s every word, praying silently to themselves that he would make it through to the end of the lesson. And when Jimmy finally got to the refrain that always closes our lessons, “The Word of the Lord,” a raucous cheer broke out. Never before have I heard a group of kids respond, “Thanks be to God,” with such utter abandon.

Like Jimmy, each of us has his or her own vulnerability, and all the anxieties that go with it. For some of us it may well be a fear of speaking in public. For others, it may be an intense insecurity, an emotional problem, an isolating sense of loneliness, a physical disability, an addiction, or something else. But whatever it is, each of us, precisely because we are human, has some weakness that is part and parcel of who we are.

The message of the *King’s Speech*, and the power of St. Paul’s teaching about the grace in weakness, is *not* some sentimental message that all will be well if we just try hard enough. Nor is it that we can always overcome our weaknesses. We often cannot. The real lesson lies in the insight that true grace comes when we share our vulnerabilities with others, when we together name our weaknesses and understand them, and when, with God’s help, we together move through them and are strengthened by them.

The great German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, expressed it this way: “We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer.” To notice and reach out to another human being in her suffering, and to stand in solidarity with her, is the essence of the holy.

From the vantage point of the world, nothing could seem more self-defeating, foolish, and wasteful than giving up one’s own power and ambition to tend to those without. And yet, what Jesus teaches is that it is in such surrender that we find our truest identity. A life that is spent soothing the pain of the sick, caring for children in distress, hammering nails in houses for those without shelter, sharing bread with the hungry, visiting those in prison, and denying oneself may seem like a squandered life in the economy of a self-centered age, but in the Kingdom of Heaven, this is what being fully alive to God looks like.

The late Henri Nouwen's life offers a stunning example of this truth. A brilliant Jesuit theologian, in the mid-80s Nouwen held a distinguished academic post at Harvard Divinity School, teaching some of the brightest minds in the world. And yet, Nouwen found the environment at Harvard to be consumed more by naked ambition, arrogance, and power than a true love for the gospel. And so, after a few years, he gave it all up.

Instead, Nouwen left the safety of the ivory tower and moved to Canada to join L'Arche, a network of homes for intellectually disabled persons, where he would spend the last decade of his life in residence at one of L'Arche's communities near Toronto.

Nouwen's friends at the time thought he was a fool for leaving a world-renown university to live an obscure and difficult existence with a group of people who weren't able to care for themselves and were on no one's list for a Nobel Prize. Yet, Nouwen intuited that he just might find God there.

Nouwen later wrote this about the experience: "Living in a L'Arche community is seeing a world where people open themselves up in a spontaneous way, no contrivance, no artifice, no strategizing . . . . The people in this world are uninterested in impressing you with achievements and credentials. They are just themselves—broken and without cosmetics or rationalization. They helped me see beyond the easy divisions we put in place between the well and the unwell, and they gave me the courage to relate to them not in spite of my frailties, but in and through them."

To illustrate the point, Nouwen often told the story of a little disabled boy, Jacques, who was making his first holy communion. After the liturgy the family had a party, at which an uncle said to the boy's mother: "Wasn't it a beautiful service? The only sad part is that Jacques didn't understand anything." The little boy happened to overhear his uncle and, with tears in his eyes, said to his mother, "Don't worry, Mummy, Jesus loves me as I am."

What Jacques' uncle failed to grasp is that communion with Jesus is less about understanding than it is about honestly opening one's broken self to God. What Jesus shows us, and what little Jacques knew in his heart, is that God loves us in our weakness, and that because he does, we need no longer seek glory and accolades from others, but are instead free to love God's world and each other with the abandon of a humble and joyful fool. For, you see, as

St. Paul wrote: "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." 1 Cor. 1:25

So, let us pray one more time: "Gracious and loving God, who chose what is foolish to shame the wise and what is weak to shame the strong, save us from the vanities of this world and the conceits of our own minds, so that we might find grace in weakness and become fools for your love's sake. In Jesus' name. Amen."