

WINGS OF THE DOVE  
SEEK THE LOW SEAT

Texts on Sunday, September 9, 2012

*Micah 4: 1-7; 1 Corinthians 1:26—2:5*

**I**N THE WINTER of 1978, I traveled to New York City to visit with a friend, buy a new suit, and come to The Riverside Church to see the senior minister. That man had previously been university chaplain at my alma mater, and during my last years at school, I was often at the family home. He was a good friend to me. Now some years had passed. I felt much less clear about life than I had when in school. The question of my vocation burned before me—but it *only* burned; it gave no light. The economy was in the dumps; I was laid off. On a cold weekday morning, I sat up there in the fifth floor study with Bill Coffin, facing him sitting just where I sit for now, telling him how stuck I was, probably trying to sound a bit above it, not desperate. Here is what I remember from that visit, besides gratitude for his friendship and kindness and great mind—something specific: He said, “Remember what the apostle Paul says: ‘For whenever I am weak, then I am strong.’” (2 Cor 12:10)

Strength in weakness, weakness in strength. This paradox is at the heart of the Christian gospel. How could it not be when our central story tells that in the strength of God, the Beloved One accepted dishonor, disfigurement, disability and death? Strength in weakness, weakness in strength. So directly did the apostle Paul apprehend this paradox in Christ—realizing that he had not understood it at all in the strength of his career before Christ came for him—that his letters to the church in Corinth make no sense, until the reader opens to the strange good news that God *only* reveals Godself in weakness, in disability, in poverty, in disfavor, in death. You need a set of spiritual bifocals to read this: “God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised—things that are not—to reduce to nothing things that are.” Why, the “world,” as Paul calls it, is still thrilled silly by voting weak people off the island, as the camera watches. But in real reality, whose ordinary name is God, the only eye that counts is watching the weak whom we’ve voted off our world, waiting to see whether we, in the strength of our Lord, will follow him on the way of weakness to the low seat.

Strength in weakness, weakness in strength. In this paradox, you can touch what we have been calling “the wings of the dove.” In an extended series of sermons, leading up to the November election, we are reflecting on one or another matter of societal concern where our collective will is stuck, and we are unable to decide, through the political process, how to apply our means to accomplish just and compassionate ends. The “wings” refer to core values lodged in the minds and hearts of mass groupings of our citizenry; and also, the wings form an appeal, inherently spiritual, to understand and even to affirm

what is right and necessary in the values of those we oppose on political grounds.

Therefore, before we take up the specific social concern for this day, notice that the values of the right wing and the left wing correspond closely with the values of strength and weakness. The right wing beats to build up the strength of the body, the left wing beats for the beaten and the weak. How bizarre that we who admire the symbol of the winged creatures, the seraphim or the dove or the eagle, nevertheless despise and wish to dispose of the wing opposite the one we hope we're mounted on. Could it be more plain that a nation which practiced a love of weakness, dismissing its police and abandoning the defense of its borders, would soon be no nation? Self-protection is the core value of the right wing; and all share in its benefits.

Yet could it be more plain that nations yearning to practice only strength, whether financial, legal, military or moral, segregating and oppressing their weak, their workers, their aged, their disabled, their poor, their sick, their least, their lost—that such nations always ultimately lose their bearings and collapse in weakness? Why? Because the human race was not for winning. The human race was for learning how to become humane. Care for what is weak is the core value of the left wing; and all share in its benefits.

Those who fail to see the paradox of left and right, of strength and weakness—those who demonize and demagogue—fail the test of the Holy Spirit. Their fears and self-interest blind them to the gospel and to *human* nature. Yet surely, those who are blind to God's real reality have a disability. Finding the right way to care for them *too* is the path for those who would not proclaim the mystery of God in lofty words or wisdom; but who have decided to know nothing except Jesus Christ, and him disabled; him crucified.

In a remarkable essay on strength in disability, a French geophysicist named Xavier le Pichon tells of a 20<sup>th</sup> c. archeological discovery. Examination of the bones of a Neanderthal man who lived 100,000 years ago established that the man had suffered completely incapacitating damage to legs and arms—but that he had lived many years with these disabilities, for the breaks and fractures were not sharp, as they would be, had his wounds caused his death, or caused his nomadic tribe to leave him to die. No, researchers are persuaded that while Shanidar could not have contributed directly to the ordinary survival needs of his tribe, he nevertheless was carried from camp to camp for many years. In other words, long ago Neanderthal man and woman evolved a need and a heart to care for the disabled. One can't help but wonder whether the Neanderthal failed in their struggle with us, *Homo sapiens*, because we are so keen to kill whatever or whoever gets in our way.

Dr. Le Pichon presses his theme in a different, however. Every animal on earth is wired to worry about the weakness of its young, he points out; and this

obviously gives the group strength. But only the human animal is being wired to care for the weakest members—the disabled, the aged, the dying, even the dead. This shift from ordinary animal desire for the advantages of physical strength toward humane desire to affirm the value of each member of the tribe, regardless of their condition—however slowly that shift is progressing, still, it cannot be accounted for as anything other than development in a direction, from the animal to the humane, from love only for what is strong to love even for what is weak, especially for what is weak. This is the direction. The left wing is the leading wing of our humane development; the right wing is the supporting wing.

Knowing the Neanderthal a little can keep us from tumbling eagerly into the error of asserting that it was Jesus who brought to earth love for what is weak. That notion is far too simple. Consider. As often as you have heard the proclamation of the prophet Micah, that “they shall turn their swords into plowshares and . . . neither shall they learn war any more,” how often have you stayed in your seat for the whole speech? It goes on: “In that day, says the Lord, I will assemble the lame and gather those whom I have afflicted and I will make the lame into my remnant, a strong nation; and will reign over them in Zion forevermore.”

What is the connection between peace among nations and community with the lame, who from time out of mind, were thought by ancient peoples to be unworthy to approach God, believing their disablements were signs of God’s wrath against the whole community? Here is an answer tentative and simple. Micah’s prophecy is a sign of the awakening of humanity underway all across the earth in his day; a sign that peace begins with a peace inside yourself, with a calming of your animal fears of death and disfigurement and disability. Only real physical presence; only real inner community with people whose conditions have terrorized our untellable dreams will lead us as nations into peace. In the human era, evolution is turning its inexorable force from outward strengths to inward; from the power to crush and coerce toward the power to love. Had this evolution not been well underway in Jesus’ day, no one could even have seen a meaning in his humiliation, disfigurement, and death. But we are climbing Jacob’s ladder. Every round goes higher, higher.

So how much care should we give to the disabled and the aged, to the weak and the dying? Care of what kind and at what cost? Should all such care and all such costs be borne privately by families and friends and churches? But look! If our weakest members are not to be left only to those who would naturally care for them; or left to die should they have no family, friend, or faith; then “we” must carry them together in meaningful ways. But who is “we”? Though you would not know it, judging from the appalling, bitter political demonizing underway in this tragically stuck nation, whenever “we”

decide to do something so that no one fall through the cracks of loneliness, ignorance, and despair, then we are governing, and we tax in order to assemble resources to do what we think is right, as a government of the people and for the people. All this is so basic. But our politics is shattered by shrill shouts and fears. Even so, hardly anyone thinks it best just to let our weakest members die. Yes, indeed, slowly we are becoming humans.

Still, our communities are severely segregated from those who are disabled and aged. Ninety percent of us die not at home, but in a hospital. People with developmental disabilities are rarely welcomed in the work place—or the worship place. It seems society will not let all these people disturb us, for they are signs of death and disability. We will even spend tax money to keep them *out* of our sight, as we get on with our projects, making money, building our strong castles.

For more than three decades, my wife Beth Mount has been stoking the engines of evolution, seeking ways to bring together people who do and who don't have developmental disabilities. She is often exhausted by the frenzy of government bureaucracies which segregate and subject her people to dehumanizing programs which never regard abilities—by which they can grow up *into* their lives and communities—but rather seeing only their disabilities, on which Medicaid billable units can be charged, only enriching others. Our patterns of resistance to weakness in our own nature—patterns some Neanderthal overcame!—draw us into a complex mess. Let's get down from the liberal soap box and admit that our governments often get things wrong when we enroll them to apply mechanical solutions to human conditions in which human presence is needed. Still, to deepen our dialogue about who we are and what sort of humans we want to become, each of us needs to be changed within.

Through those who are weakest, we ourselves can enter into the transformation of peace which the prophet Micah proclaimed, and for which Jesus took up the cross. Dr. Le Pichon, who lived in Jean Vanier's original L'Arche community, puts the invitation to this transforming walk in these terms:

Transcending our fear of pain as we welcome the suffering person and put him in the heart of our community [has been a] . . . major factor in our humanization. . . . The suffering person is the ferment for the transformation of men and women, and beyond them, of the whole of society . . . God invites us to enroll in their school, this rough school of suffering, lived in community. For without us . . . they risk falling into despair. But without them, we cannot enter the Kingdom.

Next Sunday we call Homecoming. Friends, knowing the shattered politics of our times will not give in to mere force, let us begin our Micah walk with the holy remnant of the disabled and the aged so we may learn together who we are, seeking the low seat.

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