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Psalm 48

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

POWER IN WEAKNESS

There was a church in proximity to one of the earlier congregations I served, where that church's pastor had quite a different style and quite a different physique from my own. He was someone who liked to pump iron and he liked to show his chiseled arms and chest even in the pulpit by preaching in a muscle shirt at times. I'll just say if I were to wear that kind of attire when preaching, it would not be very inspirational. In this fellow's church, there was also a large statue of the bible character, Samson, that showed his bulging muscles. I'm not going to analyze Samson's story this morning, but you might remember that his reliance on his physical strength at times actually led him astray from serving the Lord. Now I'm sure the muscle-bound minister I mentioned focused on more than physical strength through his preaching, but I was always a bit intrigued by his method and style in the context of our society that already over-emphasizes external appearance and physical strength.

Whether it is physical strength or commanding influence or great affluence, there are those who seem to be very focused on their own personal power. Sometimes, people who want others to know that they are powerful seem almost trapped into doing whatever will make them appear to be powerful in business or sports or politics. Kindness or compassion that they might want to express may bring worries that such acts would make them look less than high and mighty. That, in and of itself, can actually be a weakness.

On the far-away Island of Sala-ma-Sond,
Yertle the Turtle was king of the pond.
A nice little pond. It was clean. It was neat.
The water was warm. There was plenty to eat.
The turtles had everything turtles might need.
And they were all happy. Quite happy indeed.

They were until Yertle, the king of them all,
Decided the kingdom he ruled was too small....

So Yertle, the Turtle King, lifted his hand.
And Yertle, the Turtle King, gave a command.
He ordered nine turtles to swim to his stone.
And, using these turtles, he built a new throne.
He made each turtle stand on another one's back
And he piled them all up in a nine-turtle stack.
And then Yertle climbed up. He sat down on the pile.
What a wonderful view! He could see 'most a mile!
"All mine!" Yertle cried. "Oh, the things I now rule!...
I'm Yertle the Turtle! Oh, marvelous me!
For I am the ruler of all that I see!"¹

For those who have never read this story from the wonderful children's author, Dr. Seuss, about the turtle king, Yertle, I'll just share that he decides that his perch, high as it is, is not high enough. So, he orders more turtles to serve as his throne, at least 200 more. When his turtle throne allows him to see for 40 miles, it is still not enough. More turtles. He needs, he says, 5,607, stacked all the way up to heaven. So Yertle was high and lifted up. He felt powerful. But in Dr. Seuss' book, we also get to hear about a turtle named Mack who is at the bottom of the stack. Sorry, it's hard to talk about Dr. Seuss without throwing in a rhyme. And kids, as they read this story, know that a fall is pending when something so unjust and unstable is built on the backs of others. Turtle or human power is fleeting.

The Apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth about human power and its limits. He became aware of his own weakness, in part through some physical or emotional challenge that he faced, which he referred to as 'a thorn in his flesh.' He prayed repeatedly that he might be relieved from that difficulty, but the answer he received from God was, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." As we focus on what God can accomplish, even through us, we become less enamored with the focus of human power. We think of the human power that leads to being able to dominate others, but God's power enables reconciliation and peace. We think of human power as someone getting all the way to the top, but

God's power enables someone to stoop in service and love. If we are chasing after what is considered human power, we may not see the grace that can allow us to thrive even in the face of various challenges. To rely on someone else may seem to be a demonstration of weakness. However, if the One on whom we are relying is the One who can turn the gloom of midnight into a new dawn, then we can explore a new power dynamic, a new use for someone else's power to be at work through our lives.

It was a few weeks ago when a horse named Justify won horseracing's triple crown. There is a different kind of horseracing that at least initially involved churches – that is the steeplechase. This kind of racing began in 18th century Ireland as a cross-country race with a church steeple used as the finish line because it could be seen from a distance.² These races now have set courses that include ditch and fence obstacles over which the horse, encouraged by its rider, must leap. The communication between rider and horse is an amazing thing. There are occasions, however, when the horse senses a lack of faith from the rider as they approach such a barrier, that the horse decides at the last second that it can't make it over. When that happens, frequently the horse stops so suddenly that the rider is often thrown. In describing this sport, one author explained what is required of the riders, saying that as they approach each hurdle, they must first throw their hearts over the barrier, and then the horse will go along too.³ When the hearts of horse and rider work together, it is among the most graceful things to ever be observed.

And when our hearts and God's heart work together, it is among the most grace-filled things to ever be experienced. We have obstacles, we have weaknesses that by every good work and word we can leap over we pursue God's purposes, when our hearts beat in concert with God's heart. We are not chasing spotlights or steeples; we simply want light from even higher than the steeple to be shining through us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Dr. Seuss, Yertle the Turtle, Redbook, 1951.

² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steeplechase_\(horse_racing\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steeplechase_(horse_racing))

³ Taken from a quote by Lawrence Bixby, who compares handicaps to the hurdles in a steeplechase. The work from which the quote comes is unknown.