

Monday, December 1, 2014

Welcome to Meditation. It's a privilege to take five minutes out of your day, to be brought together into this most important part of your life: your spiritual relationship to God. Many of us find it difficult to get quiet enough, to get disciplined enough, to find peace enough inside to simply take these moments we have to devote ourselves anew this day to the Living God. That's what these times are meant to do: help us devote ourselves anew to God. This is what I mean by having a devotional time together.

Isn't it strange that those of us who consider ourselves Christians, or people of faith, would find it difficult to make room in our schedules for that which we say is the most important thing in our lives? But it is true. This week, we can take this five minutes a day at 9 am to do so. This week, we consider anew how God can bring us into better places than we currently inhabit. This week, we reflect together on how God makes us strong, gives us hope, invites us to experience inner peace, helps us experience joyful celebration, and finally shows us the reality of giving and receiving love.

So how does God make us strong? It's a rough world out there. You only have to watch the news once or twice to tell you how much our cities, our nations and the world is broken. Individual crimes seem to be up here in our city. Much of what we depend on to address injustices and inequalities also appears to be quite broken.

How can God make us strong to face the storms of our lives, not only in our culture, politics and present situation in history; but also inside ourselves, in our personal relationships, in our families, with our neighbours and with friends, co-workers, colleagues and students? The answer surprises me.

God uses our weaknesses to make us strong. (repeat) How can this be so? Don't we have to emphasize our goodness and strengths so we can

overlook or even deny our weaknesses to survive, to get along in life, to succeed? No. God wants to use our weaknesses.

In our weakness, we can turn to God for help. In our weakness, we can acknowledge that our lives aren't as manageable or controllable as we once thought. Relying on our own strength, we can even question if we need God. But this is not the way.

The Apostle Paul reflects on his own weaknesses. He put it like this in 2 Corinthians 12, verses 7 to 9: "Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me."

I know this sounds counter-intuitive, because it is. It sounds like the opposite of what should be. But here is what I am learning: The places in my life where I am weak, where I am scared or scarred, where I don't like myself, or where I can't make any sense of life; those places where there has been abuse or addiction, given or taken, where injustice, harm and hurts have happen and may even haunt me, those are the places where God wants to give me courage and strength to know Him and receive from Him all I need. His outstretched hand is extended right now to you and to me, to go on a journey this week with Him. This is a week to be weak with Him. Cast your cares on God because He cares for you.

I don't know what the areas are in your life where you feel there are thorns in your flesh, (which I take to mean irritants or worse) or even messengers of Satan (the accuser) that keep coming into your heart or your mind (maybe tapes playing in your mind of unkind words), or simply places in your life where you feel tormented, by memories, by actions and words in the past. These places can become the places of newly found power in your life. God can make these places become refuges of His grace, safe places of His love.

Do you believe that? Do you believe God can transform the worst parts of your life, the worst losses, the most terrible moments of your life and make them the places of strength, or courage, of power from on High? Come along with us this week and find out. In fact, take a moment right now and say to God with me, "Lord, you know the hurts and habits in my life. I don't want to fear them anymore, but explore what you can do and turn around those painful, pleasure-less parts of who I am into places of power for your Glory, for your purposes in Jesus' name." Amen.

Tuesday, December 2, 2014

Welcome to Meditation. This week we are looking at how God can use our weaknesses to make us strong. The first thing is always to ask God for courage to face our weaknesses, because our tendency is to deny them, to pretend they do not exist, or aren't so bad. But the reality is that these things kill us on the inside, or God can use them in a wonderful way.

Let me say that if you are not sure what your weaknesses are, then may I encourage you to ask a friend or loved one, someone close to you that you trust, what some of your weaknesses are. If you have the courage to do that, you will begin your journey of finding new found strength and power in your relationship to God.

Many of us struggle with discouragements. We are discouraged by mean or hurtful comments that some offer us without knowing it. We are discouraged by our lack of progress in certain areas of our lives. We are discouraged when we once again lose patience with some situation or person. We are discouraged when our health does not appear to be going in the right direction; or worse, when the health of our closest loved one is in jeopardy, and we are the care giver. There are discouragements in our workplaces, on the news, poor life choices of those close to us, family members, children, grandchildren. What are your discouragements today, now?

The discouragements seem to pile up in a big heap in our lives, and we wonder why we might experience the stress we experience. God knows the pile of discouragements we face. He knows how those discouragements can make us hopeless. As you consider that question of what discourages you your homework for the day, let me turn to the Scriptures with you.

The Apostle Paul says, in Romans 5: 1-5
Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. ³ Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵ And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Now there's a lot in those verses. There is the fact that a relationship with God comes as a gift to be received. All you do is take the gift, say "thank you," and then live in light of that gift of a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. That is the center of the Christian message. Do you know Him? If yes, let's continue on. If no, then now is a good time to say "yes" to Christ.

You may have noticed that hope comes in the end of the list. But that is not where the list starts. The list starts with suffering. The brokenness in our lives make us candidates for God's healing wholeness. But we need to acknowledge those areas where we need help. The word for suffering that Paul uses is really about the trials, afflictions and distress in our lives. It reminds us of Job who lost his family, who lost his real estate, his money and his reputation. And even his friends accused him of not understanding God. We go through much in this life. As we face the discouragements, the trials, the distress, the losses, the hopelessness we can often face, God can meet us in that place.

May God give us what we need to persevere today, because God is building into us who have said "yes" to Christ a character, a strength, and a hope that is marvelous. It doesn't come easy. There aren't all the answers you may wish to have. But as we trust Him in the darkest times, He meets us, wraps His arms around us and gives us hope.

Let us pray. Lord, when it seems so dark ahead, and when I am discouraged, and in a very low place, meet me with your light and your hope, with your creativity and your way out; in Jesus' name, Amen.

Wednesday, December 3

Welcome to Meditation. This week we are looking at how God can use our weaknesses to make us strong. The first thing is always to ask God for courage to face our weaknesses, because our tendency is to deny them, to pretend they do not exist, or aren't so bad. But the reality is that these things kill us on the inside, or God can use them in a wonderful way.

Many of us know that we cannot control the people around us. They often do not respond in the way we expect. They are sometimes unpredictable and their choices can disappoint us. We also know, when we are honest, that we cannot sometimes even control our own choices. We seem to get into patterns of thoughts and behaviours that do not make our lives better, but plunge us into unhealthy and dysfunctional ways of thinking. Let me give you some examples.

Worries and fears. I don't know anyone who plans to spend a significant part of their day worrying. They care about someone close to them, who is facing financial, emotional or spiritual problems. They think about them. They may even talk to them. But they worry. I worry. For me personally, I think if I can logically work my way through the problem, then there surely is an answer. This is not true. Some will consistently choose self-destructive behaviours, addicts for example, and don't only think about the homeless or drug addicts, but those with drinking problems, workaholics, food addictions, emotional co-dependencies,

control freaks and many other addictions, trying to fix them when we know we cannot fix them.

Fears in our lives come up and it is hard to face them. Fears are hard to face, particularly if they are accompanied by self-destructive behavior, emotional, physical or spiritual self-abuse. These parts of our lives can be so pervasive that we do not even know we are doing it. Biting a nail or ignoring a pain is a common thing among us.

Of course, we are only speaking of symptoms. What are the symptoms in your life that you are a broken person? Do you have worries or fears? Are you anxious about some context, some relationship, some place or person? It is good to consider those things in our lives that steal our peace and our serenity. Because when we do consider them, we open ourselves to the God who can transform our fearful, anxious places into peaceful, serene places. How can such a bitterly cold place be made warm and dry?

The Apostle Paul says in Philippians 4:6-7: Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

What is stealing your peace right now? Paul's answer is somewhat simple. The answer to finding peace is in your relationship with God and specifically talking to God about the fear, the worry, the anxiety, the addiction, the lack of control, whatever it is. Just say, "Lord, take this fear. Take this relationship. Take this addiction. I need your help. I cannot change myself, but You can." Simple prayers for complicated lives. Be sure to say "thank you" for what's going right, and you might even be bold enough to thank God for what's going wrong.

And here's the promise when you face the dark side of yourself with God, or when you face another's poor choices in the context of your relationship with God: the peace of God that passes understanding will

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guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. That doesn't mean the problem will go away or that there won't be any consequences for poor decisions and destructive behaviours. It does mean that your reaction and your inside processing of what is going on will hugely change, because God is at work within you. This takes time. Any relationship takes time to rub off on you. But God can do amazing things in short amounts of time. I've seen others transformed. I've seen changes in myself.

Let's trust God together today for the peace you need and desire. Let us pray: Help me, Lord, to trust you anew with those anxious, fearful, uncontrollable parts of my life. As I do, please bring your peace, in Jesus' name.

Thursday, December 4, 2014

Welcome to Meditation. This week we are looking at how God can use our weaknesses to make us strong. The first thing is always to ask God for courage to face our weaknesses, because our tendency is to deny them, to pretend they do not exist, or aren't so bad. But the reality is that these things kill us on the inside, or God can use them in a wonderful way.

We have looked at those things that kill our hope, and our inward peace. Today we look at what many people think is unimportant. We look at the need to laugh and to celebrate. I say people think this is unimportant or non-essential to life, because I look out at people's faces during the week, I see a sea of seriousness, anxiousness and crankiness. Now I don't expect to see a crowd of big happy faces. After being a pastor for over thirty years, I don't expect to see big happy faces on Sunday morning either. People just have whatever look they have on their faces. But I do know that laughter, joy and celebration are what keep me going. If I can see the humour in the moment, I can face the tragedy in the next moment. There is something I look forward to for a long time in advance, although I hate to admit it. I look forward to the grab bags at our Christmas tea. I look forward to the little creative games our Woman's Auxiliary plays once a year in the same season.

It is said that if you have a small group that you look forward to attending every week, almost no matter what it is; it will keep you healthy, keep you going, where those who have little or nothing to look forward to tend to give up, and it does affect your health. This is true for our indoor bowling and bridge groups on Thursday. These are simple activities, and a cup of tea in between. But we enjoy coming together, no matter what our skill level is like.

No matter how serious the meeting, nor how grave the reason for meeting, it is good, I would even say imperative, to laugh together. Sometimes it feels like there is no reason to laugh, and that all the news is bad news. But we can always find a little joke or pun, not to force it; or punish anyone, but just bring a little humour.

In Nehemiah's time, the time when the Israelites had all been exiled to Babylon, a king allowed the Israelites to return to their land and rebuild. Many saw Jerusalem in rubble, and had little hope. They saw and heard that they had been exiled because of their sins and that God had punished them. But on the occasion of hearing the Scriptures for the first time in a long time, Nehemiah encouraged the people to celebrate the progress they had made in rebuilding the wall and coming back to their city. They could have chosen to only weep and lament how bad everything looked. But:

¹⁰ Nehemiah said, 'Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.' (Nehemiah 8:10)

There is strength that comes from God to face all that we have to face in life as we laugh, eat some sweets (not too much) and food, realize how this day is unique, commit the day to God and say to the Lord, "Lord, I am a bit cranky today, can you do something about it?" You know God can do it. The key is admitting what you need.

Why is it so hard to admit what we need? Sometimes we want others to think better of us, than we think about ourselves. Sometimes we don't

want to admit our desperate state. Sometimes we don't even know how grumpy we look and how cranky we sound.

But once we look in the mirror, let us not try to forget what we have seen. I know sometimes it is a shock. Who is that tired old guy in the mirror? Was that my father or older brother?

But as we look in the mirror, we are encouraged to laugh and say, "Lord, you know what's going on, and I don't. Help me this day to enjoy what you are doing in my life, no matter how hard it gets."

We realize as Christians that the Holy Spirit is trying to transform us with the character of who He is: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control, against which there is no law. But for some reason, we don't seem to appreciate these things until we have experienced a lack of self-control, unfaithfulness, roughness, badness, unkindness, impatience, anxiety, no sense of humour and apathy, the opposite of love.

As we admit our need, God's reality becomes more apparent in our lives. We don't have to be perfect. We just have to be who we are. And we are all in process.

May the joy of the Lord be your strength today. Let us pray: "God, you know how grumpy, impatient, and angry I can get. Meet me where I am in the midst of these places, and I will trust you anew this day. In Jesus' name, Amen."

Friday, December 5, 2014

Welcome to Meditation. This week we have looked at how God can use our weaknesses to make us strong. The first thing is always to ask God for courage to face our weaknesses, because our tendency is to deny them, to pretend they do not exist, or aren't so bad. But the reality is that these things kill us on the inside, or God can use them in a wonderful way.

We have considered those places in us where we have lost hope, those fearful and anxious places, places where we cannot see the humour or celebrate the good. Today we look at self-acceptance and acceptance of others. Without a good measure of grace, it is hard to not be hard on ourselves; and consequently, when we are hard on ourselves, we are hard on others. That's just the natural consequence of hardening, both in our self talk that is harsh and judgmental, and our thoughts of others that quickly become condemnation.

Now no one I have ever met starts out the day by saying I'm going to be hard on myself and hard on others. Usually this happens over a long period of time and is connected to childhood messages we received. The question is not so much how it developed, but now once we have recognized how hard we can be on ourselves or others, the question is "How can we change?" Or are we simply destined to be that grumpy, judgmental, hard person that others see, but perhaps we do not see.

In the end, we all need grace; grace to see ourselves, grace to be loved and cared for, even if we aren't as lovable or lovely as we thought. Love is a hard word to understand, and can be hard to experience. The word has become so sexualized, but all of us know there is something very basic, very human in that word "love."

The Apostle Paul was trying to help a church in trouble in this area, and wrote in one of his letters to the Corinthians a passage that unfortunately is almost exclusively used at weddings. It is meant to be a basic passage for all of us who are recovering from broken experiences of love. 1 Corinthians 13: 4 – 8:

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love is graceful acceptance of another human being. Love can move on from there to seeking another person's best. But it begins with acceptance,

respect and care. The reason why Paul's understanding of love is so helpful is because we have all experienced the opposite of what he says love is.

We know impatience and what it is like to not be listened to. We know what it is like to hear unkind words, whether the other person meant to say them or not. We know how envious we can be when we see what someone else has or is. We have heard others boast about themselves, belittle us and who seem to be full of themselves.

We know what it is like to be dishonoured, in public and in private, where hurtful words have come, again either intentionally or not. We know or have known those self-seekers who seem to be very aware of their own feelings and perspectives, but not very aware of anyone else's, sometimes even when they are confronted by another point of view.

We have received angry tone and angry words. We know people who keep score of how many times they have been wronged, and even if they don't know the number, they exude the bitterness and the resentment that go along with victimization.

We may have known people who habitually lie. They may not even know they are not telling the truth. Some we may even consider to be evil, that is, enjoying seeing others hurt, enjoying stealing and lying.

Love is the opposite of all these experiences. Love protects, trusts, hopes, perseveres. Few of us love well and consistently. Some are amazing, but most of us struggle in both giving and receiving love. I do.

When we are hurting, we can come to God, saying, "Lord, build me up with your acceptance and care. I am broken and hurting. I don't even know how to respond to those who have said what they said to me. I need you to care for me, as you would care for an abused child. You know the way forward, but I don't."

Sometimes it is simply hard to acknowledge the hurt, because it is overwhelming. Where we expected to be loved, we were hurt, and not necessarily because the other person was even trying to hurt us. They too

are going through difficult and dysfunctional relationships, quite apart from us. What we can do is once again acknowledge our need and pray.

When we do pray and open ourselves in the weak places of our lives, then God can show us His power and strength and healing in our lives. The weak places of our lives can become strong. The worst places of hiding and secrecy can become the strongest places of helping others and seeing transformation in ourselves. The least valued garbage in our lives can be redeemed as treasures in God's hands.

They say where a bone has broken and heals, that is where it is strongest. In our admission of brokenness, we are qualified to come alongside others, to encourage, to accept, to help, to correct, to affirm, where before we had no authority to do so. God can show the world His treasure in us, the broken clay vessels that we are.

Thanks for being with me this week, I'm Jonathan Dent, Minister at St. David's Presbyterian Church and Interim Moderator at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, here in St. John's. Let us pray: Show us anew, O God, what we need to see and hear, to get the help we need and thereby help others. Thank you for being with us, no matter what. In Jesus name, Amen.