



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"Sacred Wounds: Becoming Strong in the Broken Places"

The Rev. Steve Peich

A while back I saw a flier for a Christian men's retreat here in Honolulu and I guess to draw the men to the retreat, they printed this high-powered charge that really got my attention.

Let me read a little of it. It's called *"I Am a Soldier"* and it is based on one guy's extrapolation of 2 Timothy 2:3-4 which says: *"You must therefore, endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please Him who enlisted him as a soldier."*

So what now follows is what pleases God who enlisted us. I will give you a reader's Digest version of the whole thing because it was quite extensive. It reads like this: "I am a soldier in the army of God. The Lord Jesus Christ is my Commanding Officer. The Holy Bible is my code of conduct. Faith, prayer, and the Word are my weapons of warfare." (So far so good).

It continues: "I am a soldier! I am not a baby! I do not need to be pampered, petted, primed up, pumped up, picked up or pepped up. I am a soldier! No one has to call me, remind me, write me, entice me, or lure me. I am a SOLDIER!"

Are you starting to feel the testosterone pump up inside you?

"I am a soldier! I am not a wimp!...No one has to send me flowers, gifts, food, cards, candy, or give me handouts. I do not need to be cuddled, cradled, cared for or catered to.

"I am committed. I cannot have my feelings hurt bad enough to turn me around. I cannot be discouraged enough to turn me aside. I cannot lose enough to cause me to quit. When Jesus called me into this army, I had nothing! If I end up with nothing, I will still break even!"

Now drop down and give me 20!!

I don't know who wrote that but I have a feeling he has got to be a guy named Sargent Rock.

Now contrast this with an honest prayer written by another guy named Frank: "Dear God, I'm doing the best I can."

Can you relate more to Frank or Sergeant Rock?

Now to be honest when I hear the Sgt. Rock thing part of me really resonates with it. Anyone resonate with some of that? I want to be that strong, committed guy whose faith never waivers, etc. But reality is that despite my grand intention to be Sargent Rock, I can feel a lot more like Frank and I can feel that way

very often because the world is tough. Life is tough.

Writer Ernest Hemingway once remarked: "The world breaks everyone, and afterward, some are strong at the broken places."

And that's what I want us to reflect on today. What does it mean, not just to be strong, but to be "strong at the broken places"? How can the deep and toxic wounds of our life become what I call "Sacred Wounds"?

Most of us in this room know the way of brokenness—broken relationships, broken health, broken careers, broken hearts, broken dreams, etc.

The good news the Gospel brings about all that brokenness is sometimes it is in and through my very brokenness and weakness, that God's strength and power shines brightest.

Who saw the movie "The Passion" by Mel Gibson? If you remember the movie begins quoting a verse from Isaiah 53: *"By His wounds we are healed."*

As most of you know, scars and wounds are brutal symbols throughout the movie. In fact, do you remember the very last scene?

It ends with the sight of Jesus, now raised from the dead, walking out of the tomb. The camera is especially focused on His wounds, which remain after the resurrection!!

Is there something to that? As one Christian historian wrote: "Jesus rose from the dead in the joy of the resurrection, yet He did not cease to be who He had been at the worst moment of His death. He rose with His wounds." - Roberta Bondi

And the thing is through Christ, so can we, if we learn to understand and embrace the essential place of some wounds in our walk with God.

The apostle Paul was one of those rare birds who could find strength and purpose in the wounds and weaknesses—not at first and not always—but given time, he came around to see things from a divine perspective.

However, the apostle Paul also ran into folks who valued weakness too little and valued strength too much and this created all kinds of problems, especially in a city called Corinth.

Corinth was a place where philosophers hung out. These guys were very impressive speakers: clever, wise, witty, and had great rhetorical skills. The Corinthians loved being impressed by someone's oratorical prowess.

So when Paul came into town they wanted him to be a rhetorical Sargent Rock; to speak as powerfully and impressively as other public orators. Unfortunately, they were in for a huge disappointment.

Let's read how Paul actually showed up. 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 says: "*When I came to you, brothers, I did*

not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ²*For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*"

In other words, he gave no fancy or impressive philosophy or rhetoric, just Jesus and His death.

Paul goes on: ³*I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling.* (Wouldn't you line up to hear a guest speaker like that?) ⁴*My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power,* ⁵*so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power."*

In fact, so ordinary was Paul in his preaching that some Corinthians remarked that Paul was inferior, unimpressive and that "his speaking amounts to nothing." Which is probably what some of you are feeling about me right now!!!

But here's the dangerous thing. Because they valued strength too much and that Paul was "weak" in their eyes, they ended up straying from Christ's teachings and fell into all kinds of spiritual, communal, and theological problems.

So Paul writes another letter to correct them. This time in his second letter he tries to establish his Christ-ordained authority (even though he is not impressive, he still has God's authority).

So he chastises the Corinthians by saying: "You want to be impressed? I can impress you. I have suffered for Christ more than any of those fancy guys you are following. I have been beaten, whipped, and left

for dead. I've had unreal heavenly visions from God that you can't even imagine! But even though all that impressive stuff is part of my service for Christ I don't want to boast about how tough, or powerful, or amazing I am. I want to boast about something else. I want to boast about my weaknesses."

In fact, he says this several times in the passage we read. Look at all this talk of weakness in just a few verses!

2 Corinthians 12:5-10 - ⁵*...I will boast only about my weaknesses...* ⁹*Each time he said, "My grace is all you need, for my power is made perfect in (your) weakness.. So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me.* ¹⁰*That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses...For when I am weak, then I am strong."*

He doesn't exactly sound like Sargent Rock does he? So what does Paul understand that Sargent Rock doesn't?

And on top of all that notice something significant in verse 7 that we read before. In it we see something went on in this great saint's life that created much pain. It's called a "thorn in my flesh." Verse 7: *"... So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me..."*

No one is really sure as to what that "thorn" really was, but whatever that thorn was it was so severe he felt like his life was being tormented. The word "tormented" literally means to beat up and made to feel weak. In other words, this is no minor irritation or small issue.

I point that out because I want us all to understand something very important. Namely, sometimes even if we love and obey God to the max we still may experience pain, suffering, and thorns.

Likewise, suffering, or the lack of healing is a *not necessarily* a sign that something is wrong with your faith, or that there is a curse on your life, or that a demon has a foothold in your life. Sometimes this may be true, but not always. And we need to be open to the reality that sometimes thorns remain in us for a long time because there is a God-given purpose to them.

I guess my point is, whatever our view of the Christian life is, whatever we think life with God should look like, whatever we think a healthy Christian walk should look like, it better have room for Thorns, Weakness and Suffering.

Real Christian living includes this truth: thorns happen even to the greatest of saints and sometimes they happen because those thorns have a greater purpose.

In fact, there can be great strength that can come *out of* and *through* the thorns if we reflect on, and work through them, as Paul did.

Paul said that he came to Christ three times in prayer (verse 8). Even though the first time Jesus told him “My grace is all you need, for my power is made perfect in (your) weakness”, Paul went back two more times!!

I don't think it is hard to speculate that he did some soul searching in between his praying. So why didn't Paul just accept Christ's answer when He first said it to Paul? Perhaps it was

because the answer was disappointing. Perhaps because it didn't make sense.

But here's the interesting thing about all of his praying: instead of finding relief, he found wisdom that redefined his view of weakness forever.

Have you ever been in that place like Paul where you pray and ask for healing or change, but God does nothing? Doesn't it sometimes leave us feeling abandoned by God? Or at best ignored by Him? Doesn't it sometimes leave our faith shaken; our heart a bit hardened?

It's hard to embrace pain when we feel ignored, isn't it? But Paul, over several prayer attempts, realized he wasn't being ignored, he was being empowered—empowered to live differently, empowered to live more powerfully than if he was strong on his own.

Perhaps more to the point, Paul saw that there are some things that God did for His kingdom through Paul and his weaknesses that He could *not* do through Paul's strengths. I know that sounds counterintuitive, but hang with me for a second.

In the not so distant past I had an illness. The doctors couldn't figure out what it was and it left me with incredible chronic pain. Moreover, it coincided during a time where there were other difficult things going on in my ministry at the church I was pastoring.

I can't tell you how many times I pleaded with God, “Would the great big world out there shift on its axis if I got healed? Where are You? What's the deal God?!”

Eventually that experience of pain changed the course of my ministry. It led to stepping down from the pastorate, which was out of the ordinary because I tend to grip so tightly onto things I just never want to let them go. But this time I did and I ended up pursuing a degree in marriage and family therapy.

But here is the thing. If I never went through that excruciating time I never would have left that position in church. I never would have studied therapy. And my ministry for God's kingdom would have been *lesser* for it.

You see, being weaker has made me and still makes me (I hope) a better listener to the pain of others. It helped me to empathize with people who feel trapped in life and ignored by God. It has made me a safer person with whom people can share their wounds.

And this may seem like little changes to you, but I can promise you that they are monumental changes in the greater scheme of things because of this reality: so much of pain is perpetuated in our lives and in our communities because we cannot find others who can walk well with us in our wounds and weaknesses. Yes, people may give us pep talks, clichés, or good theological lessons, but they don't give us room for our pain. So in the end, we hide our wounds from them.

And one reason they don't have room for our pain is because they have not faced and dealt with the pain of their own life.

One Christian author, John Eldrege, put it this way, “I don't trust a man who hasn't suffered.

I don't let a man get close to me who hasn't faced his wound. Think of the phonies you know. Are they the kind of man you would call at 2am when life is collapsing around you? Not me. I don't want clichés; I want deep, soulful truth, and that *only* comes when a man has walked the road (of his wounds)."

To whom would you go at 2am with your anxiety, broken marriage, and painful doubts and fears? To Sgt. Rock? Why not? Because we know that when we are in pain the Sgt. Rocks of our world do not have room for our pain and weakness. It's only those who know and have faced *their own* wounds and brokenness, who have room for ours.

So my question for you all this morning is this, "Do you have room for the wounds of others because you have faced your own yourself? If not, what is the cost to our lives and our community?"

This is one of the great things I appreciate about Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and AA sponsors. Think about it for a minute, why does AA work? Why don't people experience more shame there because after all, people often stand up in these meetings and confess how they fell off the wagon this past week, but now are sober for two days. How is it that they can totally admit how they blew it and failed and yet not feel shame?

Why does such openness and honesty about failures help so many people overcome something so powerful as an addiction?

I think part of the reason is this. In those meetings they meet *other* wounded people, people broken by the world, but who are now strong in

the broken places and who are now strong enough to be safe, real, open, and have room. People who because they are dead honest about *their weaknesses* can hear, have room for, and respond well to the wounds of others—no matter how bad or how much failure there may be attached to that wound.

Part of my point is this, to move from a "Toxic Wound" to a "Sacred Wound" requires a mature love of a community that can handle *every part* of a person's life...warts and all. A love that can hold *all* of who we are as something sacred.

We cannot be real or open or walk through our pain by ourselves because if we do, instead of our pain making us *strong*, it simply makes us *hard*.

On the outside hard and strong look similar, don't they? But what's the difference between the two?

For me, being "hard" is infused with anger, fear, and emotional distance. That's what happens when we are hard; we step back from each other. When we are hard we are more likely to be defensive and strike out if someone comes close to or touches our wound. This is why when we are around hard people we feel like we are walking on eggshells.

The wounded one might act aggressively or tough, but in reality they are very weak inside, but they make everyone walk on eggshells so that wound doesn't get touched again.

When we are hard we steel ourselves against the world because hard people see the world as fundamentally unsafe and a threat to their wound.

In the male culture steeling ourselves against pain and the harshness of reality is highly valued. The whole Rambo/Clint Eastwood/Robert Deniro tough guy thing is highly prized, isn't it?

But listen to this one pastor who seems to get it right about such a steely stance: "The trouble with steeling yourself against the harshness of reality is that the same steel that secures your life against being destroyed secures your life also against being opened up and transformed." - Frederick Buechner

In contrast, being strong creates a greater open stance to the world *not* guardedness. And when we have a more open stance to life, now we can change, now we can transform and grow. That's how you get stronger in the broken places.

But please don't misunderstand me. Strong people are not necessarily *healed* people. They are simply *changed* people.

New York Times editorialist David Brooks wrote a book called *The Road to Character*. In it he studies the journeys of various people who were leaders, but who also went through great trials and pain in life. Here is part of what he concludes, "All wise and great people go through a crucible of pain, disappointment, and perhaps even tragedy."

Brooks then says, "Such people don't come out healed; they come out different. Each phase of this experience (of the crucible) has left a residue on such a person's soul. The experience reshaped their inner core and gave it great coherence, solidity, and weight."

That's a good description of a strong person. Not necessarily healed but different, weighty, and solid.

A number of years ago I went through a devastating situation in church. I felt so betrayed and soulfully wrecked. To protect my heart I started to become hard by being very angry.

I was on the mainland at the time and normally I would jog on the nice side streets because there are less cars and people. But one day I was so filled with anger that I purposefully jogged on the main street in town just to have someone bump into me. I figured that if they bumped into me it would give me an excuse to rear back and punch them.

I know that sounds absolutely horrible for a pastor to say, but that was how hard my heart became. (By the way, no one bumped into to me so no punches were ever thrown.)

During that time I also started to meet with a retired Presbyterian pastor named Don Hawthorne, to deal with all this pain. As a man and as a pastor Don had been through the wringer in life. But all that pain turned into wisdom, compassion, and graciousness.

He listened so graciously even when I told him how I just wanted to hit someone. He listened again and again to my hurt and pain without hurrying me to "get over it" or ever judging me or even judging the ones who hurt me. And he always held my wounds as something scared in his hands.

Here is one of the interesting things that happened when he would pray for me. He didn't necessarily pray, "God, deliver Steve from this hurt." But rather, "God, help Steve

grow deeper and stronger *through* this pain." In other words, "Lord, make Steve a man he has never been before." Just like Jesus was doing with Paul through his wounds, making him a different man, a truly powerful one in Christ.

Don would never ask me, "Are you over it yet? Are you healed yet?" But would gently probe, "Are you growing stronger, Steve? Are you becoming a different person?" In his care I went from Hard to Strong, from Toxic Wound to Sacred Wound.

I share all this because from that devastating experience came an entirely new way of ministering to others, an entirely new way of doing church, as well as a new way of preaching with new insights and wisdom. And it made me what one writer calls, "a Wounded Healer".

Listen to these wise words from Christian writer Henri Nouwen: "Nobody escapes being wounded. We all are wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main question is not 'How can we hide our wounds? so we don't have to be embarrassed, but 'How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?' "

When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers. Jesus is God's wounded healer. "Through His wounds we are healed."

I only got to such a place in life because another wounded man walked with me in mine. That's how wounds become Sacred. That's how we become stronger in the broken places—because of the care, love, and listening of *another wounded*

soul who has room for our brokenness.

What happens when we are around people who cannot handle brokenness, who do not have room for *all* of who we are? They only want the nice parts of who we are. We end up hiding. We put on masks. We move away from each other.

The Latin word for "mask" is Persona. How many of us use a Persona to hide our Person? Like on dating sites, job interviews, or on a resume, etc.?

The sad thing about hiding behind a persona is that when we hide we are not known. And as I like to say, it is hard to feel fully loved if you are not fully known. We suffer for every bit we want to hide. We suffer, at the very least, a lack of love.

So what practical things can you begin to do to move your wounds to sacred wounds, to become strong at the broken places? There are many things I could say here, but let me just say a couple of things.

First, spend time praying to God with these kinds of questions in mind: How has this wound changed me? What is God shaping in me that was not there before? Am I stronger or simply harder? How can I use this wound to serve others?

Second, and I know this is not an easy one, try one time in the next few weeks to share what you have hidden for so long with someone whom you can *deeply* trust. And let me emphasize, such a person needs to be deeply trustworthy.

Maybe it is a spiritually mature friend, your small group, a therapist, a counselor, or a pastor, etc.

Share with them one of your deep wounds, or about the dreams that were shattered, or about new dreams you are nervous about living into.

Recently, I shared with some of the staff a longstanding painful issue in my life. And what was great is that when they listened to me they held my pain graciously, empathically, and soulfully. And they didn't try to fix me. It felt so good to be so loved.

If you are going to be "the holder of the wound" please do so wisely, maturely, and compassionately. And whatever you do, please commit to absolute confidentiality.

So why share all this with you this morning? To assure you that though your wounds be deep and long standing, in God's hands they do *not* define you. They don't have to oppress you any more.

I share this because Christ's love for you changes everything. Because of Christ you don't need to hide your wounds anymore. You don't have to be ashamed anymore. You don't have to wear masks anymore. And like Paul, you don't have to impress anyone anymore. That's the freedom Jesus Christ gives us through His wounds.

Let me end with one counselor's extended paraphrase of Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 12. It's a good summary of what we have been talking about. Again remember what it said in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10: He said to me, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is perfected in weakness...for when I am weak, then I am strong.*"

Her extended paraphrase goes like this:

"For when I have been broken, then I can be with other broken people.

For when I have faced the end of myself, then I can face the end in others.

For when I have understood the sufficiency of grace, then I can give that grace to others.

For when I have been broken, then I understand why forgiveness is so difficult.

For when I have been broken, I am unafraid of not having all the answers.

For when I have been broken, I can sit in utter darkness and tears with another and not feel compelled to figure a way out." (Dyne Peich)

Brothers and sisters, the world breaks everyone. But through Jesus Christ we can become strong in the broken places.

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Note: Sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by emailing: fpchkoolau@gmail.com