Self-Reliant! And Faith?

*Romans 8: 22-27*

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A rabbi and a priest were playing golf one day and the rabbi noticed that before every putt, the priest would cross himself. At the turn, the priest was putting like a Masters champion and several strokes ahead of his friend, the rabbi. So the rabbi asked a bit sheepishly if the priest thought it would be all right if he, a Jewish rabbi, crossed himself before he putted. “Sure, rabbi, go ahead,” said the priest. “But it won’t do you any good until you learn how to putt.”

Self-reliance!

Just think about the messages of self-reliance in our culture:

- You’ve got to learn how to stand on your own two feet.
- No one is going to hand you anything on a silver platter.
- God helps those who help themselves.
- Pull yourself up by your bootstraps.
- Don’t come crying to me.

In fact, we’d better not cry about anything lest someone accuse us of weakness.

In 1968, Presidential front runner, Senator Ed Muskie of Maine, was being attacked by a powerful New Hampshire newspaper publisher. Muskie’s wife was under character assault, accused of a drinking problem and of using off color language on the campaign trail. So Muskie held a press conference in front of the newspaper and called the publisher a coward. But when Muskie started defending his wife, he filled-up with emotion, his voice cracked, and it appeared that tears were rolling down his cheeks. The speech was during a near blizzard so others said those were not tears but melted snowflakes!

Never mind, the press and the voters saw it as a sign of weakness, this voice-cracking, crying, emotional candidate. Muskie’s campaign went into a tailspin from which he never recovered.

The message? We are supposed to be James Bond or Katniss Everdeen of the *Hunger Games*….self-reliant.
We have a long history with the myth of self-reliance in this country. In 1830, Ralph Waldo Emmerson, wrote a famous essay called *Self-Reliance* that said: “Rather than relying on anything external, even God, we are too depended on ourselves and the divinity that resides in us.”

Wow. The divinity that resides in us.

And if we listen to some voices in our country, you’d think that America was totally built on the concept of complete self-reliance, independence, and without any government or community help...without land grants, farm subsidies, oil supports; without the community aiding in building barns, fighting fires, and building schools.

There is a great myth of self-reliance which is a river running through us.

I

But you and I know that we are not always that self-reliant and strong! We wish we were.

Did you see the movie, *Limitless*, with Bradley Cooper? He is an unmotivated, young writer with no ambition, the ultimate procrastinator, who keeps making excuses as to why he can’t finish a novel he has been working on for years. His longtime girlfriend has had enough and breaks up with him.

Then, Cooper’s brother-in-law, who works for a pharmaceutical company, introduces him to an experimental drug that he says will make him brilliant. Cooper takes it. By the next day, Cooper has rewritten and finished his novel. The next week, he studies the stock market, and with his new found brilliance takes a little money and makes thousands, then hundreds of thousands. He is limitless. Self-reliant.

Watching this, I found myself secretly wishing I could be that smart, that self-reliant, that accomplished!

But what you and I know is that we are sometimes inadequate, dependent and in need. Sometimes life’s difficulties threaten to take us under! Right?

So, is there any shame in admitting that? Will we buy in to the myth of self-reliance, that great pretense that we can and should always be strong, always self-reliant, and never vulnerable?

This is a good time to remember Moses who came in contact with a bush that just kept burning. The voice of God came out of that bush and said something like this:

“Moses, your people are groaning under oppression and I want you to go down to Pharaoh and tell him to let my people go.”
In so many words, Moses says: “You want me to do what? I can’t match up with Pharaoh. I’m not up for this; you picked the wrong guy!”

And God pretty much says: “It doesn’t matter who you are…what matters is who I am and that I’ll be with you.”

This reminds all of us that when we feel ill-equipped, weak, or overwhelmed, God says, to us, “I will be there with you.” That’s God’s answer to our weakness.

II

Paul says basically the same thing in his letter to the Romans. The powers, the principalities and pressures of life may sap our strength and steal our courage but they will never defeat us because “the Spirit helps us in our weakness.”

What a great line. And it is a great line because it is a true line. When we feel frightened, discouraged, weak or vulnerable, that is precisely when God seems to hear our cries and comes to help us in our weakness.

If we listen to ourselves and overhear the hearts of others, this is what we often hear:

Lord, I am a parent trying to raise my children in a frightening world. Sometimes I feel helpless in the face of all the forces out there which can lead my children down a catastrophic path: peer pressure, drugs, dropping out, the wrong crowd...there are so many things to worry about. And even if I teach them, Lord, to trust, to have faith and values, I can’t control their circumstances. Where, Lord, will I get the wisdom to raise my children in the world today?

And the Spirit helps us in our weakness.

Lord, I am aging, and trying to live each day with dignity and grace. But it’s getting harder and harder to take care of myself, to do the simple things I once took for granted. I don’t want to be dependent on others. I don’t want ten doctors managing my life and my choices. At a time in life when I need stability, it seems I am facing more uncertainly than ever before. Where will I find the strength and wisdom, God, to live with dignity and purpose?

And the Spirit helps us in our weakness.

Lord, I am in a good career, providing for my family and making a contribution to my company. But another opportunity has been offered with more money and responsibility. It will mean moving, and it will mean more time away from my family and from my children’s daily lives. Where will I find the wisdom, and to make right decision?

And the Spirit helps us in our weakness.
Lord, I am a teenager and wondering what’s right. Some of my friends are experimenting with drugs; some are drinking; some are sexually active. I want to be popular and I also want to find a way to be true to what I believe. Where will I find the right answer and the right direction Lord?

And the Spirit helps us in our weakness.

How does the Spirit help us in our weakness? Maybe you have discovered, as I have, that the Spirit helps us in more ways than we can imagine, often in subtle ways, often through people, often through listening or prayer or just paying attention to God’s movement in our lives.

Sometimes God seems to put God’s word directly into our hearts and minds, a word, a thought that strengthens us and makes us able. At other times it is only in retrospect that we can see how God has been with us in our difficult passages …and we can see how certain people became God’s messengers.

Are you with me?

III

Ministers can tell of being in circumstances that are tragic, or messy, and confusing. And they wonder what to do.

Once I read in the morning paper of a murder suicide. The early twenties girlfriend had broken up with her boyfriend. In an unexplainable horrific act, the next day the boyfriend went to his ex’s apartment and shot her, then shot himself.

The day I read about it in the paper, a church member, actually the Clerk of Session, called me. Turned out his law partner was the father of the boy who had shot his girlfriend and killed himself. My friend told me the family did not have a church and wanted to know if I would do the funeral of his partner’s son who had murdered his girlfriend and then killed himself.

As we head out the door to be with people and families who are staring into the abyss, what do you say? What words will you offer? Will you be a theologian or a pastor?

And for all of us in these circumstances, if we are honest, we don’t have a clue about what to say and we are completely aware of our weakness and complete inadequacy.

But then, in the situation, face to face, the words come out. Who knows what we say, or what others hear. My guess is that we could say it in Chinese and it wouldn’t matter…because most of us come to realize that it is not who we are or what we say. That what matters is that God is there. It is at these times that we know absolutely for sure what Paul meant when he said: “the Spirit helps us in our weakness.”
Then Paul adds: “For we do not know how to pray as we ought but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.“

There was a man, a single parent, whose young daughter was in the hospital, dying of leukemia. He visited her every day. Some days she was stronger than others, but her decline was continual.

Her birthday came and her father came to the hospital with a cake. As he turned the corner, he almost bumped into one of his daughter’s nurses coming out of the chapel. He had been in that chapel many times before, a small room with a dozen chairs and a life size portrait of Christ on the wall. “How is my daughter?” he asked the nurse. She hesitated and then said, “She’s taken a turn for worse.”

He handed the cake to the nurse and hurried to his daughter’s room. Within an hour, she took her last breath and numbly, the father sat there for hours as people came and went, offering words of comfort.

Finally, he got up to go home and passing by the chapel, he stopped. There was the birthday cake with his daughter’s name, sitting on a chair where the nurse had left it. He picked up the cake and pondered the irony and the absurdity of the birthday cake.

Suddenly he threw the cake at the face of Christ. Then through his tears, it seemed that the figure of Christ just stood there, allowing the cake to slide down his face, as if it were tears streaming down the cheeks of Jesus. And in some unexplainable way, the father felt at peace. He knew the heart of Christ was breaking as well.

As Paul says – the spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words express.

Yes, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. When you and I let go of the myth of self-reliance and self-sufficiency, we come face to face with God, and the spirit helps us in our weakness.