



Sermon  
Epiphany 6C, February 16, 2025  
Luke 6:17-26  
The Rev. Emily Williams Guffey  
Christ Church Detroit

O God, the strength of all who put their trust in you: Mercifully accept our prayers, because in our weakness, we can do nothing good without you. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

In a sermon in London in 1934, Dietrich Bonhoeffer explored the reality of weakness. Why is there weakness? Who are we that we experience weakness? He stated that “every philosophy”, every religion, every way of thinking “has attempted to answer”, has wrestled with what meaning could weakness have in our world.<sup>2</sup> “He admitted that everyone seems to have attitudes about weakness”, one way or another: attitudes about physical “weakness”, emotional “weakness”, what even constitutes “weakness” in the first place.<sup>3</sup> And that people would so much “rather ignore the problem of dealing with weakness”, of dealing with the presence of “the weak”, “lest it make them” feel “uncomfortable”.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From the Opening Collect appointed for the day, *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 216: “O God, the strength of all who put their trust in you: Mercifully accept our prayers; and because in our weakness we can do nothing good without you, give us the help of your grace, that in keeping your commandments we may please you both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.”

<sup>2</sup> Quoted and paraphrased from an excerpt from “Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Compassion for the Poor” by Geoffrey B. Kelly, *The Living Pulpit*, 2008: <https://www.pulpit.org/dietrich-bonhoeffers-compassion-for-the-poor/>. About the essay, largely an excerpt from Kelly’s book *The Cost of Moral Leadership* (2002, Eerdmans), the editor writes: “Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s prison writings, his courageous stand with the Confessing Church, and his martyrdom for opposing Hitler during World War II all overshadow his earlier writings. In this excerpt, adapted from *The Cost of Moral Leadership*, Geoffrey Kelly showcases some of Bonhoeffer’s less well-known but powerful pre-war preaching focusing on the poor. Bonhoeffer’s words are as relevant, challenging, and inspiring today as they were three quarters of a century ago.”

<sup>3</sup> In this transcript, the blue quotation marks indicate air quote gestures that I made while preaching, to invite listeners to consider what weakness is and who gets to define it, not quotation of other sources.

<sup>4</sup> Kelly, *ibid.*

In this sermon in 1934 London, Bonhoeffer worked with Paul's words in Second Corinthians that "my strength is made perfect in weakness"--that, whatever strength we may claim, whatever strength we may experience, whatever strength we may know, is not ours; it is God's grace, and thus, our strength is made known most fully, is made perfect, in our weakness.<sup>5</sup>

He explored further with these Christians in 1934 London what meaning dealing with human weakness would have for them, Christians in the 1930s. Why does and why would the existence of "the weak" and "the destitute" seem so important? <sup>6</sup> Bonhoeffer, a consummate preacher, volleyed a series of rhetorical questions, saying, "Have you seen a greater mystery in this world than 'poor people,'" than "weak people"? Have you seen a greater mystery in this world "than people who cannot help themselves but have to rely on others for help, for love, for care?"<sup>7</sup> – pressing rhetorically, that is, that all of us, because we're human, are "weak". We are the weak. All of us rely on everyone of us for help, for love, for care. (I thought I'd lose my voice today to add a little affect to the fact that) we are all weak, and we rely on one another's help and grace and generosity and understanding.

Bonhoeffer went further, pressing his hearers to consider: had they ever really tried to consider what life looks like and feels like from the perspective of those whom culture and society would eschew and ostracize as "weak"? Have they stood in that void and truly considered their perspective, before ignoring them? "Have you ever thought," he said, "what outlook on life" [a 'weak person'] "may have?"<sup>8</sup> And, being amazing with words, he pressed them further that if they had not actually paused long enough to consider that, is their life "qualitatively different"<sup>9</sup> - that is, do they assume that they are so different from a "weak person" that they can't even pause and consider how their neighbor might be feeling, what their neighbor might need, who their neighbor truly is? And secondly, underscoring that none of us is "qualitatively different" from anyone else, he said that we are "inseparably bound" to one another and above all, inseparably bound and responsible for those who would be called "weak".<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Bonhoeffer, "My Strength Is Made Perfect in Weakness", sermon, 1934, London: The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, edited by Isabel Best (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Kelly, *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Bonhoeffer: "Have you seen a greater mystery in this world than poor people, old people, insane people—people who cannot help themselves but who have just to rely on other people for help, for love, for care?"

<sup>8</sup> Bonhoeffer: "Have you ever thought what outlook on life a cripple, a hopelessly sick man, a man exploited by society, a colored man in a white country, an untouchable [in India] may have?"

<sup>9</sup> Kelly's paraphrase

<sup>10</sup> Bonhoeffer: "And if so [following previous quote], did you not feel that here life means something totally different from what it means to you, and that one the other hand you are inseparably bound together with such unfortunate people, just because you are human like them, just because you are not weak but strong, and just because in all your strength you will feel their weakness? Have we not felt that we shall never be happy in our life as long as this world of weakness from which we are perhaps spared—but who knows for how long—is foreign and strange and far removed from us, as long as we keep away from it consciously or subconsciously?"

This week here in Detroit, we heard a story of a family that was living unhoused; they were in a van and two kids died overnight, froze to death, because their family was unhoused, calling the attention to all of us Detroiters, if we were not thinking of our neighbors already, shocking us into attention: What do our neighbors need? What is it truly like to be living without a home, or to be unsure how long one's housing might last? Will we be able to pay rent in a couple weeks? Will we be able to keep the lights on and the heat running?

I meet our neighbors in need all the time. Mothers have pulled up to the church in vans, begging for help, and I have talked with them, these hardworking, relentless women, who are doing everything they can to take care of their kids. They are working, and bringing the kids along with them; they are doing everything they need to, in their family van, and, reaching out to people like us to help them pay a bill to keep the heat on, help them toward their rent, help them buy some food for the day, help the kids get clothing. I talk with women in this very situation with all too much regularity. Upon learning their situation and what is needed, I sometimes am able to help them through your generosity; your gifts that you've made to the Clergy Discretionary Fund allow me, when I meet someone in that situation, to perhaps pay a bill, buy some groceries, buy some clothes for the kids, help with rent, make things a little bit easier and safe for their family.

Bonhoeffer, in his searing words, calls all of us to pay attention to our neighbors around us, and though it might seem easy and comfortable to just ignore the needs of our neighbors, that is not who we are as Christians; that is not who we are as humans. We are, in his words, "inseparably bound" to one another, responsible for "the weak".<sup>11</sup> He went further in this sermon to insist "that Christianity is in its origin a religion of and for the weak". That is what Jesus is all about, that is what following Jesus is all about, that is what got Jesus into a whole lot of trouble, because the powers around him did not want to pause long enough to consider their neighbors. They had no attention for "the weak" around them, and simply wanted to exclude, erase, and ostracize anyone who needed anything, anyone who made them uncomfortable.

Bonhoeffer continued in this sermon to say that "Christianity stands or falls with its revolutionary protest against violence, [against] arbitrariness, [against] pride of power, and [it stands] with its plea for the weak. Christians," he said then in 1934, "are doing too little to make these points clear, rather than too much. Christendom adjusts itself far too easily to the worship of power. Christians," he said, "should give more offense, [should] shock the world far more, than they are doing now. Christians," he said, "should take a stronger stand in favor of the weak, rather than considering first the possible right of the strong."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Kelly

<sup>12</sup> Bonhoeffer

Jesus, in his words to those gathered around him—not on a mountain, but on a level plain, a level playing field<sup>13</sup> –speaks exactly to this, that those who are weak now are rich in God, and that those who are strong now should watch out, because their so-called strength will vanish. Jesus uses words that his own mother had spoken when she had him in the womb,<sup>14</sup> that God sees us, each of us humans, as intrinsically beautiful and naturally weak, and thus, inseparably bound and responsible for one another. Christians are called to call this vision into reality, becoming countercultural (and there is so much to counter), persistently advocating on behalf of any who are powerless, because any strength that we know is God’s grace alone. Any weakness that we know is holy, Bonhoeffer says. “Weakness is holy”<sup>15</sup> and if we don’t see this, Bonhoeffer would say and Jesus says: check our attitudes. Reverse our perspective. Pause for long enough to truly consider and see things from our neighbors’ perspective. Do not feel so falsely comfortable as to think that we might be any different from our neighbors in need.

The weak, Bonhoeffer said, “need not serve the strong, but the strong,” Christians, “must serve the weak, and not with any feeling of benevolence [or empty obligation] but with [true] reverence and love,”<sup>16</sup> for all of us in our weakness know more fully the grace and the love of God, and we know that first through one another.

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<sup>13</sup> Sarah Henrich, “Commentary on Luke 6:17-26”, 2002, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-luke-617-26-2>

<sup>14</sup> Luke 1:51-53: “He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.”

<sup>15</sup> Bonhoeffer: “Weakness is holy, therefore we devote ourselves to the weak. Weakness in the eyes of Christ is not the imperfect against the perfect; instead, strength is the imperfect and weakness the perfect.”

<sup>16</sup> Bonhoeffer: “The weak need not serve the strong, but the strong must serve the weak, and not with any feeling of benevolence but with reverence and love. Not the powerful is in the right, but ultimately the weak is always in the right. So Christianity means a devaluation of all human values and the establishment of a new order of values in the sight of Christ.”