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Rev. Gail L. Miller

Introduction to 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10

Our first scripture lesson is written by the Apostle Paul about a vulnerability, a weakness he had. He never actually says what it is, but it really doesn't matter. His point is that his repeated appeals to the Lord about it do not result in its being taken away. Rather, Paul receives an encouragement from the Lord which strengthens him spiritually. Paul writes:

Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 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. That is why, for Christ's sake, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:7b-10)

Introduction to Matthew 25:34-40

Our second reading is a familiar parable of Jesus', in which he reframes for us what it means to care for those who are the most vulnerable among us. Jesus says:

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' (Matthew 25:34-40)



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Sermon: Vulnerability – Living into the Resurrected Life

A few weeks ago, I happened on a story just at the same time that we were putting the different topics on the Sunday's that would take us through Lent; and I knew it would be perfect for today's theme: Vulnerability. And so our sermon this morning **is** this story, and is a little longer than our typical sermons are. If we were in the sanctuary at church, I'd ask you to imagine yourselves sitting at home in your comfy chair, perhaps with your coffee in hand and your dog at your feet or your cat on your lap. So how excellent that that's where you actually all are!

The story we'll hear now is written by Maureen Swinger about her brother Duane. And I'll share it this morning as she wrote it and in her voice. Listen for vulnerability - living into the resurrected life.

The Teacher Who Never Spoke (Maureen Swinger April 5, 2017, Plough Quarterly magazine; excerpted and adapted for this sermon)

Duane was born healthy, as far as anyone could tell, but when he was three months old he was attacked by his first grand-mal seizure, with countless more to follow. He was diagnosed with Lennox-Gastaut syndrome, a rare form of epilepsy, and his seizures were so brutal that the doctors didn't think he'd live out the year. That one year turned into thirty-one.

Nobody knows how much Duane could understand. In one aptitude test, he showed no interest in differentiating a red square from a yellow triangle, and the neurologists told us that he had the cognition of a three-month-old. We were amused. How do you measure intelligence in someone so full of life, whose constant seizures played havoc with his memory and situational awareness?

This was Duane: A lanky body in a high-support wheelchair, eyes often vacant, staring a hole in the ceiling. One of his wrists was noticeably contracted, and yes, he drooled. He had an impish grin, a mischievous sideways glance from coffee-brown eyes that you only saw if you were at eye level – and if he wasn't in a post-seizure daze.

He derived enormous satisfaction from the little things that made up his day. You earned a huge smile just for shifting him to a more comfortable position. Kids fiddling with the knobs on his chair were enough to bring on the giggles.

If he was watching fireworks, he would laugh till he choked. "Breathe, D, breathe!" we'd beg. Then, whoosh . . . BOOM! The next one lit the sky, and D was off again. And when he was mad the world knew that too. If he had tired of sitting around at church or at dinner, he'd let you know with a "get-me-out-of-here" roar.

The five of us siblings were born within the space of five years, with D right in the middle of the lineup. As kids we prayed confidently for miraculous healing, sure that the next morning he'd

run out of his room to meet us. But sooner or later, the realization caught up with each of us: D is D, and he's here, as he is, for a reason.

That discovery didn't make life easier for our family. [Of course] we can scan back over thirty-one years and celebrate the wondrous times. But slowing the frames, more lonely scenes come into view: the sleepless nights, the sprints to the hospital, the ache we sometimes felt of always being different.

To be sure, we were among the most supported of families caring for a child with special needs. As young people, my parents had joined a movement founded on Jesus' call to love one another. We lived in an intentional community (Bruderhoff) of three hundred people committed to serving each other throughout life. Duane, in short, could not have landed anywhere better. And yet, even this did not supply his story with a tidy happily-ever-after.



While Duane was a young child, our family managed all of his home care. During the day the teachers at the children's center included him in his peer group's activities. That worked, mostly, until he reached his teens.

By then, he was taller than my dad, and if a seizure started during a transfer to or from his wheelchair, he could hurl himself and his caregiver to the ground. Starting in ninth grade, he spent his days off the community premises, at a school for children with special needs.

Duane - Age 5 Our team of siblings had by now developed into a capable crew of nursing aides, cooks, and errand runners, all of us proud to "manage" looking after Duane. (My brother Evan was the first responder, with a knack for sleeping through Duane's deafening happy noises, but waking the moment he heard the muffled grunts of a grand-mal seizure starting.) Nobody but us witnessed the crazy nights, and we didn't talk about them. We hardly realized ourselves how worn down we were getting.

From the outside, it looked fine. Duane could go anywhere and be met with joyous greetings. People in the community cared about *him*. But not many truly knew him, or ever met him without a family member or aide at his side.

In retrospect, I see how much our family, all rather stubborn individualists, benefited from those often-strenuous years. Would we ever have become a team if we hadn't been tested? We discovered that love is action – often the same action over and over. And we learned that prayer had better come before any action.

We also learned that encouraging words from others had their place, but that some expressions backfired. Take the word *gift*. People often told us what a gift Duane was. And yes, he was a gift, wrapped in incredibly complex packaging, a present that could tear your heart in two. But



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hearing the word, I was sometimes only just able to bite back a snarky “Would you like to do the night shift with our gift?”

In the end, this was the form of love that we learned to value: someone showing up to take Duane on a walk. Someone hosting a fireworks show for his birthday. Someone looking him in the eye and saying, “How’s it going?” without worrying about getting an answer.

Then a new pastor arrived at our community where we lived in upstate New York. Richard Scott was funny, British, not too tall, and very perceptive. He looked Duane in the eye, and Duane looked back. Richard didn’t only see a boy in a wheelchair who needed complex care. He saw a teacher without any students, a missionary without a mission field.

Richard asked an important question: If we weren’t finding a place for Duane to help work for the kingdom among us, didn’t that indicate a kind of blindness – an inability to see as Christ sees? These concerns came to an unexpected head at one community meeting in which we were reading together from an essay by Eberhard Arnold (the founder of the Bruderhoff):

*[As I see it, there] is a clash between two opposing goals: One goal is to seek the person of high position, the great person, the spiritual person, the clever person ... the person who because of his natural talents represents a high peak, as it were, in the mountain range of humanity. The other goal is to seek the lowly people, the minorities, the disabled, the prisoners... [And it is] **this** goal [that] seeks the wonder and mystery of God becoming man, God seeking the lowest place among us.*

At these words, my father cried out, leaped from his chair, and ran out of the room weeping. The rest of my family was frozen in place. After all, these words, though vivid, expressed a familiar idea, one we’d heard in church before. Perhaps we were a little too used to hearing it.

[As Christians] we are convinced that God is in the business of exalting the lowly, that he takes his place in the frailest of bodies, that his “power is made perfect in weakness.”

Well, my father heard that truth in Arnold’s words that day. So did Richard. And in a community meeting not long afterward, he offered a startling proposal: what if Duane came home from his school for special needs – to teach? What if a new generation of young men became his students?

What happened next was nothing short of a revolution. The young men stepped up, and Duane’s life took an astounding new turn. Because to be Duane’s student was like no other class. Your crash course includes pushing his tricycle for hours, massaging his thin legs to relieve muscle cramps, and getting more oatmeal into his mouth than onto his shirt.

It also includes finding that nothing you’ve excelled at till now counts for much here. Best tackle on the field? Meaningless. D needs help simply turning over in bed. Straight-A student? Who



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cares? D never even graduated from kindergarten. You're sociable, clever? All useless. Conversations with D are basically a one-way street.

The real kicker is standing by him through a seizure. You can do nothing to stop or ease it. All you can do is keep him clear of hard surfaces and stroke his shaking shoulder. Then he will fall asleep for hours, leaving you with another assignment – the lesson of quiet. Life is not always a party with continuous background noise and witticisms flying.

Duane shredded many of the rules we so often unwittingly live by: "Get ahead," "Don't commit yourself," "Watch your back." And these rules all seem necessary – even as they drag us down under a burden of self-protection that leaves no room for costly obligations, or for love. Dozens of young men now had the chance to change those rules.

My parents prayed for each of these young men, knowing that they often came to Duane's door at a time when their own forward momentum had stalled. Some were not sure of their faith. Some were not sure of their future. Some were letting go of a love that wasn't meant to be, and some didn't yet know what love was.

What Duane taught varied from person to person. But nobody graduated from his school unchanged. After he died, my parents were inundated with letters. One man wrote,

During my early twenties my life was fraught with struggle and confusion, till I got the chance to care for Duane.... He taught me that I really didn't know it all, ... that perfection and strength as God sees them were utterly different from my previous strivings for those qualities. I don't know where I'd be without having known him.

Duane's care was physically and mentally demanding. You could never park him an inch too close to the table, or forget to set his brakes. Transfers from bed to chair required both gentleness and strength. Through it all, D was patient. Yes, he could holler when he had to, but he trusted you even through everything that didn't go right.

When Duane turned thirty, no one would have guessed he was heading into his final year. He had outlived plenty of doctors' predictions. Meanwhile, though, his old friend Richard was dying of cancer. Perhaps his own impending mortality made Richard aware of something we couldn't yet see. One evening, he spoke to [my siblings] Brendan and Miriam with the directness of one who does not have many words left: "When Duane's time comes, let him go. You and I know that he'll get the best medical care in the world. But don't try to stop him from going home."

By September, it was clear that Duane's body was beginning to wear out. After years of tireless care, his medical team had to face the fact that nothing further could be accomplished except in the way of pain relief. As our family talked through hard decisions, we knew: after more years with him than we thought we'd ever get, his time was coming to an end.



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He died so quietly that our brother Gareth, holding his hand, could hardly tell when he'd gone. But his eyes, which had been glazed and half-closed all day, were wide open and clear. He had not smiled in days; but now he was smiling. And it was a smile of surprised, joyous awe.

[At his funeral, our brother] Brendan read from *Adam, God's Beloved*, an account of Henri Nouwen's time caring for a young man with a condition similar to Duane's:

While looking at Adam's quiet face, we prayed in gratitude for the gift of his years of life, and for all that he had brought to us in his great physical weakness and incredible spiritual strength....

What was Jesus talking about when he said that the last will be first, and why does he accord such honor to "the least of these"? He says that the door to his kingdom will open to the people who spend time with them, even if they are just offering a glass of water.

When he says "last" and "least," Jesus is talking the language of our present world, not of his kingdom; he is pointing out the position to which we relegate people we see as unimportant. But he also says that his kingdom is not an otherworldly domain of future happiness for good people. It's a real, boots-on-the-ground, right-now kingdom happening around us. What if "the least" are actually powerful commandos making inroads for their leader in enemy territory?

To crack a cold heart, to train it in love, is the most liberating service any person can do for another. These gifts do not show up on an ultrasound. They aren't mentioned in the first diagnosis of disability. They aren't measured by tests.

And that's why Duane's story is more than a tale of a great kid growing up in a caring family, and more than a testament to the abstract idea that all people's lives have value. There are people living bravely with disabilities everywhere. Many have strong networks of care, and many are devastatingly alone. Are the healthy individuals who pass them by, though, less alone?

Could the quest to eliminate others' suffering be a disguised attempt to distance *ourselves* from pain, because we fear there is no way through it?

My father heard a quote during a church service, and in that moment all the hurt stored up over the years erupted for everyone to see. Yet his love and care continued quietly through all the years to come, steadied by faith and humor. My mother wept at the graduations of Duane's classmates, and at their weddings. Yet while grieving deeply for what could never be, she completely embraced what was.

Is it possible to protect ourselves from grief? And What if we end up protecting ourselves from love?

[By God's grace] we were able to reach through this pain to the love beneath. Yes, our lives are richer because he was in them. But that's not because Duane proved to anyone that he was an asset.

It was the reverse: he was able to contribute because his community knew that he was valuable anyway, as a brother. His presence with us brought the image of God to light – within him *and* within those who cared for him.

This wisdom is not in any ethics textbook. These students thank Duane – my brother and theirs – for an education that completely overturned their judgments of value and success. At the end of the line, they encountered the last; then the whole line turned, and the last was in the lead.

The End.

We don't need to be in a wheelchair, to be vulnerable. To be human is to be vulnerable - and in need of God's grace. So say, "yes" to your weak spots. Because there, there you find the strength of the Lord your God pulling you into the resurrected life he has planned for you.



Duane and the author Maureen



Duane with his parents

Amen.