

*I am who I am*

First Congregational Church, Branford

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On a summer morning, I thought it might be fun to first share 10 church signs:  
Looking for a Lifeguard? Ours walks on water.  
When life gives you more than you can stand... kneel.  
Our church is like fudge. Sweet with a few nuts.  
We are still open between Christmas and Easter.  
God wants full custody, not just weekend visits.  
Honk if you love Jesus, text while driving if you want to meet him.  
Noah was a brave man to sail in a wooden boat with two termites.  
With all this rain, we need an ark. Fear not! Wait for it... We Noah Guy!  
Tweet others as you want others to tweet you.  
And, The best vitamin for a Christian is B1.

Okay, in much of Paul's 2nd Letter to the Church in Corinth, Greece, he's defending his ministry - rebutting his critics - who claim superiority over him. He has answered them on loyalty to his Jewish heritage, his achievements and suffering for Christ. But, Paul's like, *guys, if I must boast - like you do - I will boast of the things that show my weakness.* He does say, *I have grounds for boasting, but I won't!* He explains that a thorn in the flesh keeps him from being too elated. We're not sure if this thorn is some chronic condition, a physical or mental disability, a recurring illness, or if the thorn in his side is the opposition of a group of people! The tough thing is, the Lord told him, this affliction will not be removed.... - that the power of God, the power of God is more apparent when it works through a sufferer. Here's Paul:

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to

torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. This is the word of God for the people of God...

Human boasting is everywhere, so when we encounter humility, people who are down to earth, it's so refreshing, isn't it? And, Paul is not only humble, he's content with who he is, flaws and all. He accepts his weaknesses. Whatever he can't do, or can't do very well, whatever his ailments, he lets it all go, and trusts that the *power of Christ* is made perfect in weakness. Paul's like, *I am who I am - so that the GREAT I AM can work through me*. Right? Remember, in Exodus Moses asked God, what shall I tell them your name is. God said.... I AM who I AM. Talk about self-acceptance!

I'm working on self-acceptance. How about you?...

I still ache toward accepting who I am - and who I cannot be.

I want to be more than I am, a great minister and preacher; but, you know what?... that all goes away when I breathe and remember why God "called" me. God told me long ago, *tell them they're okay*. That's it. *You're okay, just as you are - you are beautiful, and beloved*.

Last weekend my son and I went for an extended weekend to New Orleans to visit my 88 year old mother in a nursing home. Having not healed from a rare pelvic fracture in February, coupled with short-term memory loss, she's unable to return to the assisted living apartment with her husband, who to be honest, isn't that long for the nursing home. It was a depressing visit! On Tuesday, on my way in to the church, I was thinking about it - and, then, have you ever noticed when you think about one hard thing, everything comes home to roost? I thought about how lonely my 17 year old son is for a girlfriend, and that I'm pre-grieving his leaving home next summer, I wished my marriage was different, I stressed over aging issues (I'm losing my hair!), then I moved onto how there are too many staff in this church... basically, I'd descended into hell! - when all of a sudden sweet Jesus saved me in a beloved song that came over my iPod, called "*Come Up Here*" by Jason Upton.

Before I share the lyrics, I know the hell you've endured, too - depression, alienation from family, mental illness, physical, mental, emotional abuse, death of a child, of a spouse, illness, loss of job, income, bullying, addiction, *pressure to succeed*. Hear this:

I was dreaming of the holy city,

I was wearing my wings  
I looked up and saw the doorway to heaven  
And I heard You call to me  
You said, come up here, come up now  
My beloved, my beloved  
Here I come, oh Lord  
In the midst, in the midst of heartache oh God  
In the midst, in the midst of brokenness oh Lord  
In the midst of persecution Lord  
I look up, I look up oh Lord  
And I see in the heavens oh Lord  
I see your door Lord, standing wide open Lord  
Wide open Lord, and I hear with my ears  
I hear your voice that sounds like a trumpet Lord  
and you're calling out to me  
Child come up here, beloved come up here  
Come up here and hear my voice  
Come my beloved come  
You are my beloved, you are my beloved  
Do you hear the voice of God sing  
You are my beloved, you are my beloved  
You are mine, you are mine and I am yours  
You are my beloved  
You children of God  
You are my beloved.  
My beloved, don't let anyone, don't let anything hold you back  
You are my beloved.

...Life may not be perfect, oftentimes situations don't improve, the thorn in your flesh isn't removed, even when like Paul, you appeal **three times** for it to be taken away, but God says, *Hey, come and rest for awhile. Let me rest in you. Let's just be together. Let me love you, and strengthen you. I just want to love you. My grace will be sufficient for you.... My grace will be sufficient for you.*

I think *Christ* rushes in when you have no more self-will, ego, tricks to hide behind. When you stand before God and say, *this is me, I am who I am*, then the I AM can come and work through you. When you're not all puffed up and proving how great you are. When a church is able to say, maybe we're not the hottest ticket on the green - maybe that's the moment when God comes and says *I AM who I AM. My will be done here at First Congregational. You just do you, and I'll do*

*ME.* Every weakness we have, as individuals, and as a church, are opportunities for God to show *his* strength, *his* power. Yeah?

We don't have to be bigger and better than we are. We can be honest and say, "I have a hurt, I feel as though I'm not enough sometimes, I have failed, I have fallen off the wagon, I have struck out at a friend, I cheated on a test, I stole from my employer, I committed adultery; or, I got bad news on a biopsy, I have cancer, my father has alzheimers, my adult child won't talk to me, my house was broken into, I'm lonely. I'm lonely. I'm lonely."

It's our weakness, and *not* our strength that binds us to one another and to Christ. I've been telling people more and more that we really do need to love our battle scars, and the battle scars of one another - they make us *more real* - just like the Velveteen Rabbit, yes? Speaking of being real, on Friday, after writing this sermon, Ken and I went to Madison to see *Won't You Let Me Be Your Neighbor*. The whole theatre breathed and wept together through this beautiful documentary on Mr. Rogers, and how he said to children, *I like you, just the way you are... I like you, just the way you are...*

Here's the thing: I love to hear about adult and child winners, but because Jesus lost, I'm more touched by the losers, by how it feels to lose - to lose a job, to lose a game, to lose a race, to not get chosen for a team or some group, or some award, or to serve on a committee. Winning is terrific, but blessed are the losers. (Someone this morning told me they were a loser. I'm a loser, too!) So often congregations and ministers are assessed in terms of their powers... powers to attract quantities of people and quantities of money, but that's not how Christ assesses us...

It's the reason why I prefer a smaller choir over one that is big with a bunch of prima donnas... And, while *I am* strong, loud, courageous, and joyful, I am *more often* weak, small, afraid, and insecure. Let me boast in *that* so that God can use it!

You know how they say most churches aren't keeping up with the times, that they need to go the way of mass media and on and on, but if you have to throw a circus in order to attract people, then the church is running away from its reason for being - to fill the broken places inside of her members, and to love her neighbors... *Won't you let me be your neighbor?* If you add on too many things in a church, it can distract and overpower the vulnerability that makes up our religion. Our religion is one of vulnerability. *Our savior was born in a stable.*

I'm grateful for all of you; for being who you are, and for touching the world with your presence. *You're here and you matter.*

In closing, will you repeat after me. Say:

*I'm flawed...*

*And, it's okay...*

*I am God's beloved...*

*I am who I am...*

Amen.