



**July 9, 2006**

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Sue Verboom

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

## “Better than Duct Tape”

There is an amazing and magical substance that you can find in most any home. Often it's kept in a humble, out of the way place, in a dark, dusty corner. But it comes to the rescue again and again, for all kinds of emergencies! It's silver; it's strong; it can repair and reinforce weaknesses in all kinds of substances and items. What is it????? DUCT TAPE!!

How have you used duct tape?

Once I was mowing our parsonage lawn in Mundelein, using the riding mower the church provided us. I must confess that I always try to ride as closely as I can to all items in the yard, because I hate having to pull out the push mower to do trimming. One day I came a bit too close to our pop-up camper parked at the back of the yard. CRUNCH! The rear bumper crumpled inward. What to do???? DUCT TAPE held that baby in place and today more than ten years later it's still holding!

How have you used duct tape?? (Invite responses from congregation.)

Is this stuff indestructible or what? (Invite a couple kids to come forward- together try to pull a long strip apart.)

Friends, you and I know duct tape is NOT indestructible. But it has a GREAT reputation! In fact, its reputation for strength is so great, that I experienced a lived parable with duct tape this week. I had decided I would give each of you a little piece of duct tape on a card to take home with you today. So, one afternoon I took my grandson to Safety Town in Pottowatomie Park where he loves to play, while I prepared the cards. I sat down on a bench with cards and a roll of duct tape. Then I panicked! NO! I didn't bring scissors! I'll never be able to tear off the tape! I thought a moment and then thought- “Hey, I've got teeth. Maybe I can start to tear each piece with my teeth.” I tried it, and it worked!

Not only did I tear each piece off, but I tore every piece in one other spot before taping it to the card. I wanted us to be able to SEE how duct tape has many weaknesses. (Have ushers begin to hand out cards.) These pieces of tape, and the many ways and places the tear appeared, spoke to me as I prepared them. A piece of tape sometimes was knotted and bunched, pinched and twisted into tortured shapes. Sometimes a piece looked perfect except for a tiny tear at one corner. Some pieces had just a little tear, and some pieces were torn nearly through, held together by a small thread. Some pieces tore at the top, some at the side, some at the bottom.

I began to see these pieces of tape as symbols of our lives, of moments in our lives, of our personalities and our actions. There are many things duct tape cannot repair, weak points that duct tape can't support. We all struggle with pain, hardship and weakness. Life can feel pinched, twisted, knotted up.

The apostle Paul knew this. He ran into “rips”, “tears”, “knots”, and “twists” again and again. He faced insults, beatings, imprisonments, criticism, hardships. He had some kind of personal torment also: the “thorn in the flesh” he refers to in today's reading. We don't know the specifics of that struggle. It could have been a physical problem, a psychological struggle, or both. Paul wanted to be free of ALL weaknesses, especially this one, but God's response to his urgent prayers was clear: “My grace is enough. Because, you see, my power is made perfect in weakness.”

How does this take shape in our lives?

A woman had worked many years for the same company. She had put in long hours, her best efforts. A new corporation purchased the company, brought in new managers and staff. She arrived at work one morning to find a letter of termination. Her heart pounding, her face flushed, the letter crumpled in her hand, she burst into her boss' office. She found herself face to face with her boss, who was standing behind his desk, pale as a sheet, holding an identical letter in his trembling hands. The woman's heart sank. She was flooded with feelings of helplessness. “You too?” she asked. Her boss slowly nodded.

And God says, “My power is made perfect in weakness.”

A young father sat stroking his four-year old son's hair as the child slept. The last visit to yet another specialist had yielded once again nothing but question marks. Tommy was unable to speak, showed bizarre and erratic behavior problems, exhausted his family and caretakers, and no one could seem to diagnose the problem or provide any help. “I just don't know what to do any more,” whispered his father. His throat tightened and he spoke in a choked voice, “I can't bear feeling this helpless.”

Yet God whispers back, “My power is made perfect in weakness.”

Helen had lived in the nursing home for about a year when her failing eyesight dimmed completely to darkness. About five months later she began hearing a ringing in her ears that the doctor patiently explained was something called “tinnitus”. It couldn’t be cured, or changed or helped in any way—so now Helen couldn’t even enjoy the audio books her granddaughter had been bringing her. Helen sat in her room, filled with frustration and anger at her own inability to do something, anything, to change her situation.

“My power is made perfect in weakness.”

Again and again throughout our lives we come to the end of our strength.

When that happened to Paul, he said, “I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecution and calamities; because when I am weak, then I am strong.”

When WE come to the end of our strength, we go looking for “duct tape”! What’s our “duct tape”? We could never list them all; we’re pretty creative, but here are a few: drugs, alcohol, cookies, associate with the “right people”, work for the “right company”, graduate from the “right school”, get married, have a family, buy stuff, buy more stuff, stay really busy all the time, lose yourself in T.V., be angry a lot.....

Do these things make us stronger? Do these give us triumph over our weaknesses?

Friends, God invites us to travel another path.

When we come to the end of OUR strength, that’s an opportunity to discover God’s strength. How can we do this?

First, don’t conclude that God is the author of your troubles. Some pain in life arises from our own weaknesses; some comes from other people’s weaknesses and sin. Other painful situations remain a mystery to us. But I do not believe God orchestrates the suffering in our lives. I am convinced God feels our heartache WITH us. Believing this helps me move to Step Two:

Allow your struggles to REMIND you of God’s presence. Invite God to come with his love and strength to do what you cannot. God’s greatest power and love are often perceived in the lowest times of our lives. We finally drop our arms to our sides and say, “I give up” ..... and in that moment God rushes in with power saying, “Don’t give up.. Never give up ... put your hand in mine and HANG ON! It isn’t OVER yet.”

In our times of weakness we finally leave an opening for the Holy Spirit to act, an opening that isn’t there when we’re sure of ourselves.

A story from my life:

One of my sons was dealing with some very difficult challenges that cut to the heart of his life. One day at work he received a very upsetting phone call. As he drove home, he was filled with powerful feelings of anguish and anxiety. His car had previously belonged to one of my parishioners. The evening sun's rays blinded him at one point, so he flipped down his sun visor. There, clipped to the visor, was a Scripture from the Old Testament. The words entered his mind and heart with power and gave him strength and courage. The words came from God, speaking with passion: "I hold you in my omnipotent right hand.... I will not fail you nor forsake you...." He came into the house shaking with emotion, and told us of his distress and the surprising appearance of God's message of power and help. "I don't know what led Wally to put that Scripture on his sun visor, but it was sure a help to me today!"

In times of discouragement, in battles that overpower us, in job losses, failed marriages, struggles with children, illness of loved ones, personal failures---- when your weakness looms large before you..... Don't despair! Don't give up! The limits to your power are doorways and windows open to the God of ALL POWER.

Friends, duct tape can't help us with the really important things. God can. God is better than duct tape. God is stronger than duct tape. God's power is made PERFECT through our weakness. What an amazing mystery. At the end of OUR power we find the beginning of God's INVINCIBLE power.

As you leave today with your duct-taped card, ask God what he wants you to do with it. God might have a plan for someone else to see this card- to find it- to speak a message to someone you don't even know! "God is stronger than duct tape"—kind of a silly image- but you never know who it might help. Listen for God's voice; do what he says, follow where he leads. God is a God of INVINCIBLE power.

Amen. Amen.