

7th Weekend After Pentecost (B/RCL): “My Grace Is Sufficient for You”
2 Corinthians 12:2-10
July 7-8, 2018
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Sometimes Scripture is clear as mud. This weekend’s beautiful but mystifying passage from 2 Corinthians 12 is a good example. So let me share with you the paraphrase from *The Message*. Paul writes:

12 ¹⁻⁵ You’ve forced me to talk this way, and I do it against my better judgment. But now that we’re at it, I may as well bring up the matter of visions and revelations that God gave me. For instance, I know a man who, fourteen years ago, was seized by Christ and swept in ecstasy to the heights of heaven. I really don’t know if this took place in the body or out of it; only God knows. I also know that this man was hijacked into paradise—again, whether in or out of the body, I don’t know; God knows. There he heard the unspeakable spoken, but was forbidden to tell what he heard. This is the man I want to talk about. But about myself, I’m not saying another word apart from the humiliations. [This is along the lines of, “I have a friend who....”]

⁶ If I had a mind to brag a little, I could probably do it without looking ridiculous, and I’d still be speaking plain truth all the way. But I’ll spare you. I don’t want anyone imagining me as anything other than the fool you’d encounter if you saw me on the street or heard me talk. [By the way, this whole passage is referred to as “The Fool’s Speech.”]

⁷⁻¹⁰ Because of the extravagance of those revelations, and so I wouldn’t get a big head, **I was given the gift of a handicap to keep me in constant touch with my limitations.** Satan’s angel did his best to get me down; what he in fact did was push me to my knees. No danger then of walking around high and mighty! **At first I didn’t think of it as a gift, and begged God to remove it. Three times I did that, and then he told me,**

My grace is enough; it’s all you need.

My strength comes into its own in your weakness.

Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. **I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ’s strength moving in on my weakness.** Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer, these limitations that cut me down to size—abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks. **I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become.**

This is St. Paul’s message to the congregation he founded in Corinth, which definitely qualified as “a thorn in his side” even if it’s not the **particular** thorn he’s referring to here! The

folks in Corinth gave Paul more headaches than all the other people he pastored rolled together. It was to them he wrote about love: love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or jealous or rude.... No need to remind them of that if they were being loving! Paul called them onto the carpet more than once for being less than loving and less than Christian and some of them didn't appreciate the correction. There were those who asked, "Who made **you** the boss over us??" They didn't contradict what he said but they challenged his authority to say it. They claimed they had better credentials and more bragging rights than he did. So he comes right back at 'em: "You think **that's** so special? How about this!"

And he talks about being swept up into the 3rd heaven, "Paradise," associated with a royal garden behind walls, accessible only to those whom the king and queen invited to join them in an intimate stroll.... Paul uses **big** language here, and more than a touch of sarcasm to get his point across – that he is nothing on his own, but united with Christ even his **weakness** becomes **strength**, even **suffering** he'd **begged** to be relieved of becomes **gift**.

- We don't know what Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was: migraines? Malaria? Eye problems? (Calvin thought Paul was talking about spiritual temptations, like pride – or on the other end of the spectrum, self-doubt. Martin Luther thought Paul was referring to people who opposed him or persecuted him. 'Could be because Luther dealt with many people who opposed and persecuted **him**! Others thought he was talking about carnal/physical temptations.) The bottom line is that we don't know what Paul's thorn in the flesh was and, although the question is intriguing, the answer doesn't matter. More important is what **our** thorn in the flesh is.
- Paul fervently asked to be relieved of his thorn in the flesh 3 times but God's answer was: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." (12:9)
- **Why** is God's power made perfect in our weakness?? Maybe because when we're at the end of our rope we finally let go and let God. **It's a paradox**, that weakness would be power. But so is our Lord's statement that those who save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for his sake will find it.

Any examples from your life? Or history?

- Someone who's terribly ill finding internal strength they never knew they had?

- Someone who suffers from addiction but in ongoing recovery finds fullness of life he or she never imagined possible? Even becoming a blessing to others?
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer reinforcing other prisoners' and even guards' faith during his difficult days in prison? During air raids he himself was terrified but comforted others who were behind bars and had nowhere to escape the bombs. (He wrote a poem about it: "Who Am I? It ends, "Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine.")

Question:

- What's our "thorn in the flesh," "the gift of a handicap to keep me in touch with my limitations"? What's the condition that makes us think, "Without this, I could be a more decent Christian! Without this, I could be a more faithful, more active servant! Without this, life would be so different...."

It's always ok to ask God to take away the source of our suffering. But when it doesn't happen, or until it happens, let's hold St. Paul's words close to our hearts:

So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me... for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12:9-10)

The nastiest thorn in our flesh, the one we all hold in common, is our sinfulness, whatever form it takes. I'll end with a snippet from a letter Martin Luther wrote to a man named Matthias Weller¹:

"But when the devil throws up our sins to us and declares that we deserve death and hell, then we ought to say, "Indeed, I confess that I deserve death and hell, but what afterward? Will I therefore be condemned eternally? By no means. For I know a certain one, who suffered and made satisfaction for me, and he is called Jesus Christ, the son of God. Where he is, there I shall be also." ["The Mutual Consolation of the Faithful"]

Amen

¹Philip D. W. Krey and Peter D.S. Krey, ed. and transl., *Luther's Spirituality* (Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press), p. 10.

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