

A Letter From Paul About Thorns And Grace
A Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
July 4, 2021
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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. 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

When was the last time you got a nice long handwritten letter from someone? Now that we can email and text and post on social media, handwritten letters have become rare. This is a loss because so often helpful background information and details are not shared in our brief communications. Even when we did exchange long letters, anyone reading the letters grandmother received from her fiancé overseas would only know of the relationship in part, unless grandfather’s letters had also been saved.

Reading a letter from the Apostle Paul to one of his churches is like hearing one side of the story. We don’t have any letters that were written to Paul from the Corinthians! So, we must do a little detective work to figure out what was going on in the community, to better understand why Paul wrote what he did.

In our reading today, we can tell that Paul is concerned about something. It sounds like he was being accused of boasting about his spirituality and about his strength. But Paul defends himself, saying that God had given him a thorn in the flesh precisely to keep him humble, and that any boasting on his part was about his weakness, not his strength. Paul makes it clear that even though he asked the Lord three times to remove this thorn, the answer, every time, was no. Even more, the Lord said to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” Paul was able to make peace with his weakness, accepting that whatever happened, his weakness revealed the strength of Christ in him.

Paul writes about how he has overcome adversity, about how much he has suffered, not in order to claim power or authority, but as an example. He shares these things so that the people of Corinth know that life is hard, and that God is the source of grace in all that we experience.

We don’t know what Paul’s thorn in the flesh might have been, and scholars have offered many suggestions. I’m not sure it matters. I think we all can identify something in our own lives that is a constant physical, emotional, or spiritual struggle. If we have asked God to remove a thorn from our flesh, perhaps God has answered us as he did Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you.”

The sufficiency of God’s grace is directly related to the point that God’s power is made perfect in weakness. The Greek word for perfect in this text is perhaps better translated as “reaches full maturity.” We are not born mature. We become mature as we recognize our weaknesses and limits, and then learn to rely ever more deeply on the power of Christ dwelling in us.

The power of Christ never seeks to dominate or control others, never claims superiority or privilege. The power of Christ seeks to support us as we stand firm in the truth of our own vulnerability before God. As painful as they may be, the thorns in the flesh that we endure are a constant reminder that we are not all powerful, in control, or even always right. If we will tend to them, our thorns help us pause and reflect on where true power and authority lie, which is only in God's power and grace.

One of the beautiful things about reading a long-lost hand-written letter is that it allows us some time for reflection, some space to recall history, hopes, and dreams. Letters lay out for us, in a way media sound bites never will, the bigger picture, the movement from hope to reality.

On this national holiday we might celebrate our independence and freedom, we might boast of our world power and strength, but Paul would have us pause and consider that it is only by God's grace that we have any power or strength, that it is not because we ourselves are strong, or have great military might, or are always right.

Perhaps it might be good for us to pause and remember our original hopes and dreams and consider where we are in our perfectness, in our growth toward full maturity. We might do this by taking time to read the Declaration of Independence, our letter of intent to the King of England, noticing where we have fulfilled those hopes and where we still fall short.

Another aspiration for our nation can be found in the Statue of Liberty. We might take some time to read the fascinating history behind its creation, and then ponder the poem, "The New Colossus" written by Emma Lazarus that is inscribed on a bronze plaque on the statue's pedestal.

Lazarus writes,

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

Somehow, I think the Apostle Paul would have liked this poem. Though there is no direct mention of God or of God's grace, there is an unspoken awareness of where strength is to be found. There is an understanding of the thorn in the flesh that each of us has, our awareness that we cannot save ourselves, and our responsibility for one another's well-being. Our collect for today, our letter to God, gathers up all of this as we pray:

O God, you have taught us to keep all your commandments by loving you and our neighbor: Grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to you with our whole heart, and united to one another with pure affection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.