

## Scripture and Message

7 July 2024

### **Scripture: 2 Corinthians 12:2-10 NRSV adapted**

<sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> And I know that such a person--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows--<sup>4</sup> was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. <sup>5</sup> On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses.

<sup>6</sup> 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, <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, <sup>9</sup> but [the Lord] 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. <sup>10</sup> 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.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

**Thanks be to God.**

### **Message: In Weakness and In Strength**

We've reached the part of Second Corinthians where Paul is defending himself. Defending his authority, defending his title as Apostle to the Gentiles. You all know Paul's story, how back in the Book of Acts Paul was Saul who hated the Christian's with a zealot's fervor. Paul saw Jesus as a threat to Judaism. Paul saw Jesus's teachings as a threat to his whole way of life, his country, and understanding about God. Paul didn't want diversity, Paul wanted the traditions of his life where he had privilege and power to be maintained. Not that Paul would have thought about it like that. Instead Paul may have talked about traditional values and how Jews needed to follow all the Law – the traditions of the past – and not some wanna-be rabbi that was watering down, making the Law less strict and more accessible - what it meant to be Jewish - so as to not lose their culture and specialness in the eyes of God. Paul was that guy. Remember, he was the terror of the young Christian church – a bogey man who came to tear families apart and throw people into jail for the sin of following Jesus.

And we all know how Paul changed on the road to Damascus and was apprenticed to learn about Jesus, and how he was then sent back to Tarsus where he lived for 10 years until Barnabas came and welcomed him back into the church where he was eventually called upon to be a missionary and where he eventually received the title of Apostle to the Gentiles. It is quite possible the church at Corinth didn't know Paul's past until some new missionaries, who styled themselves as super-apostles, came and tried to say that they were the ones to listen to – not Paul. Theirs was the true church – the true way – they had the true knowledge and the most gifts - and how could you believe someone like Paul anyway – he persecuted the church in Jerusalem; he had the leadership arrested; he even participated in the stoning of Steven the First Martyr; are you sure you want to listen to him?

Instead, they said, you should listen to us. We have the secret knowledge. We have the best gifts from God. We have been taken to the heavens and have seen Jesus!...So, ok, in my humble opinion, these super-apostles were the forerunners of televangelists and fake revivalists and tent preachers. They gave a good show – unlike Paul. They offered absolution for sin and salvation all for the low, low price...you get the picture.

And Paul does not put on a good show. In fact, one time his preaching was so boring a guy sitting in a window fell asleep and fell out of the window – needing Paul to revive and resuscitate him. Paul didn't have glitz or showmanship. As Paul would be the first to tell you, he had many weaknesses.

But Paul was being pushed into a corner; his credentials were being questioned. “Who do you think you are?” That was the question bandied about. Well, actually, it was probably more like, “Who does he think he is?” Because the whispers and the questions were asked behind his back. His detractors, the super-apostles, showed up and were trying to tell the new Christians that Paul wasn't worth listening to, that they were much better at this Christian life thing than he was. He had no special authority, no special powers, no insight into what it means to follow Jesus Christ.

In answer to all of this, Paul decided to talk about his own experiences and knowledge. Paul had to tell his own story, to ‘toot his own horn’ for a while. “I don't boast,” he said, “but if I did, I'd tell you about this and that and the other thing. I don't brag, but if I did, I'd tell you about where I've been and what I've seen.” He felt he had to do it, didn't want to, but he did...for a chapter and a half. But just when you might think he had the detractors all cowed, all shamed for besmirching his character, he makes an abrupt shift here in what we read this morning. Paul talks about his weakness. A recurring weakness, “A thorn in the flesh,” Paul writes, a weakness, a pain, a failing.

Humility was important to Paul, maybe because he struggled with it. Maybe because he knew how important it was. Maybe because he knew that the surest sign of getting off track was losing sight of who was in charge, even of your own life. “To keep from being too elated,” too puffed up, too full of himself, “a thorn was given me in the flesh.”

What was it? We don't know. Commentators speculate on it still to this day. Some assumed that the Corinthians knew what it was, so he didn't need to mention it. Others say it doesn't matter. Some say it was physical - a disability of some sort, a recurring disease; others claim it was psychological - bouts of depression; some think it was social - the messenger of Satan was a detractor who kept nipping at his heels wherever he went, or his sexuality or lack of sexuality, temptations of the flesh; still others think it was spiritual - a temptation he couldn't shake, a nagging doubt or fear. In one of my seminary classes, a few speculated to the amusement of the class, that the thorn in his flesh could be his stereotypical Jewish mother-in-law, whom he can never please, and will never be good enough for her precious daughter. “You barely make any money with your tentmaking, and you wander all over the known world, you're never at home to help her with the kids, speaking of kids, where are my grandchildren – and how many times is she supposed to bail you out of jail???”

It doesn't really matter what Paul's thorn was. You can insert your own thorn here. Whatever you imagine, or whatever makes your life of discipleship more difficult. Whatever it is that you struggle with, whatever it is that makes you fall short of even your own ideals.

Paul's point here, like his point earlier, is not really to draw attention to himself—despite what it might sound like as you read these verses. He is inviting us to see an opportunity for humility. When you are hurting, when you are weak, that's the moment when you might finally realize that you need help, that you need to learn, that you need something you can't supply for yourself. This thorn in the flesh is a tool, a teaching tool to keep Paul focused on the source of goodness and wholeness and joy in his life. And it isn't himself or his accomplishments. It is the God who saves him, the God he experiences in the life of the community of faith, the God who speaks to him through many voices and in many moments.

Notice too that this thorn doesn't come from God. God doesn't cause suffering to get us to pay attention or to change our ways or our thinking—despite what some loud voices in our world today are trying to tell us. Suffering isn't punishment. **But** God can use any occasion, any circumstance to help us grow and learn. This is

what Paul is talking about when he claims God said to him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” This is why Paul writes, “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.” Whenever I remember that I am not the focus or the center, God is the center, God should be the focus – whenever I remember that I am not the hero of the story, Jesus is the hero of our story, then we are using our weaknesses for the sake of Christ to be strong.

“To God be the Glory” we sing. “Amazing Grace – that saves me even and especially when I am at my weakest – when I remember that God is the one who is the hero and focus of the story.”

This morning, we are invited to put God, to put Jesus at the center of our lives through the grace offered to us in this Sacrament of Holy Communion. After our hymn I would invite you to offer God your weaknesses, knowing that God loves you, loves us *in*—not *in spite of*—our weaknesses. Praise be to God. Amen.