

“Thorns”
2 Corinthians 12:7-10
By Pastor Gary Walters

Our scripture lesson this morning comes from the book of Second Corinthians and I'm going to read Chapter 12:7-10. "To keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassingly great revelations that the Lord has given me, there was given me also a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me, but he said to me 'my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weakness so that Christ's power may rest on me, that is why for Christ's sake I delight in weakness, in insult, in hardship, in persecution, in difficulties, for when I am weak it is then that I am strong." The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God!

I would like to start with a story. Perhaps it's one you've heard, even so it's one that should just be branded collectively on our memory, it's just that good. True story, from early in the life of Mother Theresa. Of course, she started her ministry in Calcutta and working there at a convent, and among the sisters, they had the different things that they did and I'm not sure of all what that entailed, but the needs of the poor, there were still a lot of gaps to be filled in, especially for the orphans. It troubled her to see these children on the street, begging for their next meal, it broke her heart to see these untouchables, these children who were just abandoned. She prayed about this and she got a message from God to start an orphanage. She went to her Mother Superior and she said "Mother, I have three cents, God told me to open an orphanage." Her Mother Superior was shocked at what she was hearing, she said "Sister Theresa, (she was still sister at that time) with three cents you can't do anything, how do you expect to open an orphanage." and she replied "It's true that with three cents I can't do anything, but with three cents and a promise from God I can do anything." The rest is history, of course. Not only did she start the orphanage but the hospitals where they comforted the dying and those untouchables who were just abandoned on the streets. Not only did it grow beyond Calcutta so that the Sisters of Mercy are now spread across the world, because of three cents, and a promise from God.

There is something of that paradox running through today's scripture passage. It is not a couple of doctors paradox, but a paradox is something that's just opposite of what we would expect. It just doesn't make sense and yet we know it to be true. This paradox that Paul talks about, that "when I am weak, it is then that I am strong." He discusses this thorn in the flesh that he will revel or he'll glory in his weakness for it is when he is weak that it is Christ can be strong through him.

This thorn in the flesh is kind of an interesting deal, it's a topic of a lot of discussion and

a lot of writing. There is really four main ideas that have been thrown out in terms of what Paul was dealing with. First and foremost, and really based on the context, this probably is it, although it's not my favorite, is persecution. The entire context of this letter that he writes to the Corinthians, this entire second letter, is really a justification or a defense of his ministry because after he had gone around and started these churches, there were Jews who were followers of Jesus who had come out from Jerusalem and were working among his churches. They said okay, Paul gave you this part, but what he forgot to tell you, or what he failed to mention was that you also need to become Jews. Now, for us this might be a no-brainer, well of course you don't have to become a Jew to become a Christian, but at this day and age there were more Jews who were Christians than there were gentiles who were Christians and there was a very heated debate going on within the church about whether they would need to convert to Judaism to follow Jesus or whether Christianity would stand on its own. These Judaizers were coming out and following Paul around, but not only were they following him around, but they were stirring up a lot of trouble and a lot of animosity against his ministry. So this thorn in the flesh, one possibility, is that it was this persecution that arose from these Judaizers.

Another one, and this one really arose in the middle ages, was that it was a temptation that Paul was beset with, something that continually troubled him again and again and that he really struggled against his entire ministry. There has been some suggestions on just what that temptation might have been, but nothing really emerges as forefront.

Another one that is very possible is this whole idea of an illness of some sort or a physical malady, and really there are two possibilities under here. One suggestion is that Paul had contracted Malaria on his extensive travels and that would help explain why he could accomplish so much and have so much energy and yet at other times be afflicted with what he describes as a very a painful and debilitating kind of ailment.

Then, my personal favorite, and this really comes from, not that I'd want this but is the one I favor, it comes from the letter he wrote to the church in Galatia and there is one point in that letter where he writes "if you could have pulled out your eyes and given them to me, you would have." Then he closes the letter with these words, he said "And, I Paul, write these words to you, see with which large letters I write to you." Based on those it seems likely that Paul was struck blind in his conversion experience and maybe from that time one he struggled with eye ailments, who knows.

The fact of the matter is, though, there really isn't enough information to nail it down to any one of those things and perhaps that's best. Because, there is a sense in which it could be all, or a combination or it could be something entirely different that is not on our radar screen, but it gives us the opportunity to identify with Paul in terms of where

we are weak and vulnerable and where we struggle.

I think Paul's words here, he lays out a principal that isn't just for Paul, but it's for us, for all of us. The interesting part about this is that what Paul presents here is really an imitation of Christ or a principal that we see played out in the life of Christ and not just Paul, not just Christ, but a pattern that God unveils again and again and again throughout scripture but also in the life of his followers. Here it is--in terms of Paul being an imitator of Christ in this situation, God could use even something as ugly as the cross to accomplish incredible good, but if you think about it, what God is doing is using really the frailty of Jesus' human body to reveal, to display, to bring about that incredible power, the incredible goodness of the resurrection and yet without the weakness, there is no power. Without the death of Christ there is no resurrection. It's an interesting thought.

It's a challenging thought, especially when you start looking at it in the life of Paul that it was through this weakness, through this thorn in the flesh, that God could display his power most visibly, most graphically, and you think about Paul struggling with this thorn in the flesh, whatever it might be, and the incredible things he could do, we don't follow the Judaizers today, we are not Jews who follow Jesus, although there are some of those around, but we're Christians. Because Paul, more than anyone else after Jesus influenced the future of the church and shaped it into what it is today. That God could use Paul to impact the world. That these churches he planted, spread like a fire across the Mediterranean World, in fact, across the entire known world, until even the Roman Empire was consumed, or covered by the church and by the cross of Christ.

It seems that Paul was weak and therefore strong. And yet, so often, I think that we are strong and yet so often weak. There is an element or a part of this that I think is missing from our experience, if not our understanding, of Christianity. It's kind of what you would expect, you think about American culture and what it is, for all its strengths and weaknesses, for the good parts and the bad, but the part that we hear and are familiar with is that despite a recession and despite whatever troubles we may have, we collectively as the American people hold within our possession, more power and wealth and disposable income than any people on earth and in fact any time in the history of the earth. With money is power and with power is this illusion that somehow we are in control and that we can do it in our own strength and we can do it on our own, we can do it by ourselves, by what resources we have, by what we can do with the strength of our arm or the power of our checkbook. In that kind of strength it's hard to get ahold of this idea that it just might be our weakness that God could use rather than our strength. It's the widow's might. You know the rich came in and put in huge sums and then the poor widow came and put in her penny and yet it was she that Jesus held up as the example, not the rich. But it was she who gave more because God could do more with

her one penny than he could with the huge sums from the wealthy. Because what she gave was sacrificial, because what she gave was with all of her heart, it represented all of her life.

We are familiar with the story of John Wesley. We might not quite understand it in this framework though. So, let me re-frame it just a little bit. Hopefully we are familiar with the fact that John Wesley was an incredibly energetic, dynamic person, who in his lifetime was able to oversee a revival that basically swept the entire world, that once you average it all out, he preached three times a day, spent about four hours in study, a couple in prayer, he had class meetings in the evenings, he had an endless list of correspondence and he wrote volumes, and volumes, and volumes, all while he traveled about a quarter of a million miles on horseback . You have to remember he was writing without the help of a word processor or computer. Remarkable!

And yet John Wesley was already a pastor, he was already a graduate, one of the youngest graduates, from Oxford University, already a missionary when he had his heart strangely warmed experience. And yet his ministry before that experience was a flop. He came back from the Americas, from his missionary work there, utterly dejected and broken and in despair about his inability to do anything. In fact, if you go to St. Simon's Island where Wesley's Oaks are at, these trees that were growing at the time that Wesley preached there to the colonist, the tour guide will be happy to tell you that there is still a warrant out on John Wesley's arrest. That's how successful his ministry here was. A very sordid story, not as scandalous as it sounds, though. But, he was at the end of his rope. In discussion with a friend they were talking about the grace of God and his saving power and he just said "I haven't experienced it, I don't know this, I'm not there" and his friend encouraged him. He said, "John, preach salvation by grace until you experience it." Well, he was a teaching fellow at Oxford and that is where he preached that first sermon on salvation by grace. It actually got him barred from the chapel in Oxford forever, but it also started the revival that would sweep the world. It was that brokenness that opened the door for what would become this incredible revival that today encompasses some 70 million people, some 300 years later. Because of that brokenness, that thorn.

It kind of begs the question, where are you broken? Where are you broken? I think that often, or too often, we offer to God only what we are most comfortable with or what we can easily part with or what is kind of our best face or where we are strongest. But, we are very slow to offer to God what will make us vulnerable, what will reveal our weaknesses or those places where we are weakest, where we are broken, where we are hurt. And yet if this principal is true its at exactly those places that God is capable of doing his best work through us. That's pretty challenging, because there is some stuff, frankly, that I don't want to dwell on it, I don't want to work from that place in my life,

that brokenness or that hurt, let alone offer it to God as the tool by which he might work through me. And yet, Paul's words challenge us. Where we are strong, perhaps we are weak, but where we are weak it is there that we are strong because it is there that God can work through us most powerfully. So, where are you broken? Can you follow Christ into those areas where you are most vulnerable, can you give in those places where you are broken, can you serve in those places where you are most afraid, can you serve, can you give, can you follow from that place of weakness. Because, three cents and the power of God can do anything.

Would you pray with me? Lord we thank you that you come to us at exactly those places where we need you most and so help us surrender all that we are to you, strengths and weaknesses alike, that you might use us to do your will. In Christ's name we pray.