

McCabe United Methodist Church

November 24, 2009

"Remember Your Parachute"

2 Corinthians 12:9

Pastor Gary Walters

Our scripture lesson this evening comes from 2 Corinthians and I'm going to read from Chapter 12, verses 8, 9 and 10. Paul is speaking to the church at Corinth.

"Three times I begged the Lord to make the suffering go away, but he replied, my grace is all you need, for my power is strongest when you are weak. So if Christ keeps giving me his power, I will gladly brag about how weak I am. Yes I am thankful to be weak or insulted or mistreated or to have troubles and sufferings if it is for Christ. Because when I am weak, it is then that he is strong."

The word of God for the people of God, thanks be to God.

Actually the parachute joke on Sunday reminded me of a Max Licado book that I had read a long, long time ago. There was a chapter in that book that dealt with parachutes; so as I was getting ready for this, that story just kept sticking in my mind. I'd like to share it with you. Flying along in an airplane and the weather is clear, it's a beautiful day, it's easy sailing, but, off in the distance there are some storm clouds. As the storm draws near the pilot gets on the radio and says there might be a few rough patches, everybody return to their seats, fasten your seatbelts, things could get a little rough. So everybody gets strapped in and sure enough, as they are heading around the storm there is part of it they are just touching on and there is a flash of lightening and a crack of thunder. One of the engines bursts into flames and the plane starts losing altitude. The pilot comes out and says folks, the plane is going to go down but don't worry we have enough parachutes for everyone. I need you to line up single file and he gives the instructions on how to use the parachute. He starts pulling them from the shelf and handed it to the first person, but she looks at her parachute a bit perplexed and said "Can I ask a question?" The pilot says "Sure." thinking she needed a little more instruction or a little more direction but instead she said "Could I have a pink one?" He looks at her in utter amazement and he said "I've given you a parachute, isn't that enough?", and he gives her a gentle push, right out the door. She has a parachute after all. The next person comes up in line and says "I get really sick from motion, is there something you have that you can give me for that?" and he said "No!" but he says "I gave you a parachute" and he gives them a push. The next person comes along and says "I'm afraid of heights, can you take away my fear?" and the pilot is completely exasperated by this time and says "I can't take away your fear, but here's a parachute, it'll work, I promise" and he pushes him out the door. Well another person decides that they would rather crash with the plane and the pilot just looks at him at him like you're crazy, "you don't know what your asking?", he tells them. Another asks for goggles, another for boots, another wants to get closer to the ground and each as they come to receive his parachute have requests of one sort or another, but the pilot responds, "I give you a parachute and that's enough."

Now that story sounds too crazy to be true and in the case of an airplane and a pilot and parachutes I would well imagine it is. But if we are talking about people here on earth and God's offer of grace, it's all too common. If you think it sounds too crazy, even in that context, just think for a moment where we are at in terms of our context. We turn on the news and we are bombarded by all the things that are going wrong in the world. Search your mind, think back, look for, try and remember the last time you heard good news. Certainly there is some out there but that is not what we choose to dwell upon. Instead it's the economy is in the tank and health care is either going to save the world or bankrupt us for now until eternity, depending on which side you are on, or the war in Iraq and all the stuff in Afghanistan, and it just goes on and on and on and on. We live in a bad news world. Then it gets closer to home because we start talking about the church and what's going on here, and it's hard to hear good news, even still.

And I was wondering if it was just McCabe that hit a rough spot, but I just attended a special meeting of Annual Conference and everyone I talked to just went "Whew, it's been a tough year". We've just absorbed it, I think, from the culture around us. It's not to say there aren't some problems, there aren't things we need to work on, but on the other hand, maybe we are asking for pink parachutes, when God has already given us what we need. Maybe we are focused upon our wants and our desires rather than what God has given to us. Too crazy to be true? Maybe so. I think there are times when despite the storms and everything going on around us, God just simply wants to give us a gentle shove out the door and we are simply left adrift, dangling from a parachute called grace. Paul writes, "My grace is sufficient for you." It's interesting, this is Paul, who probably no greater evangelist, or at least one of the greatest evangelists who has ever lived, who has faith could bring back the dead and yet as he prays here, it's not a question that his faith isn't strong enough or isn't big enough, but that God's response is "My grace is sufficient for you." It's not that he had done something wrong, it's not that he was out of step with God's plan, but God says "My grace is sufficient for you."

There are no easy rides. It's kind of disappointing I know, that faith isn't a get out of jail free card in terms of the troubles and trials that come. We are broken people living in a broken world and trouble, it's not a matter of if, but when. When we are caught in the storms and the turmoil. It's not surprising that in the midst of those kind of storms we cry out to God, hoping, praying for a miracle, and he gives us one, poof the parachute of his grace catches us and we find ourselves dangling from the amazing grace of God.

In Paul's context, few questions have generated more speculation than exactly what Paul's thorn in the flesh was. There are thoughts that it could have been malaria or another illness, based on some of the symptoms that Paul talks about in different parts of his letters, and the tradition associated with him. There is reason to believe that it was his eyes, after being blinded on the road to Damascus he suffered from poor eyesight. In the context of the passage of 2nd Corinthians there is reason to think that it is opposition that had risen up against his ministry and the thorn in the flesh was more a pain in his back. We don't know though, there isn't enough evidence and actually I think it's good that we don't know, because no matter what the trial or that thorn might be

for you and I,

Jesus' response is the same, "My grace is sufficient for you." and we drift gently through the storm, held by that parachute of God's grace.

It's not that God wants to keep us comfortable, he is far more interested in our character. It's not that he wants to make us unhappy, but he is not especially concerned for our happiness either. At least not at the expense of our relationship with him. You see this is where our current context of troubles all around and the storms are raging, this is where I think God is far more concerned about us than we realize, but we are concerned about the circumstances and the events, God is concerned about his relationship with you and I. And if economic hardship will drive us to a closer relationship with Christ, so be it. Money comes and goes, he owns the cattle on a thousand hills, what is it to God. If relationships are rough and difficult, so be it. If those difficult relationships drive us to God because we realize it is hard to trust in mere people, then fantastic, because what God is truly interested in is our relationship with him, our character as we seek to be more and more like him, as we draw closer and closer to his presence, his likeness, his love and as we learn to depend more and more upon his grace. Understandably in the storm we cry for a miracle, and we do get it, it's God's grace. That's the grace that sustains us in the storms, but then Paul comes up with this absolutely crazy statement, I don't know if you caught this, let me repeat it. This is verse 10, "I am thankful to be weak or insulted or mistreated or to have troubles and sufferings if it is for Christ." Thankful?, thankful?, how in the world could anyone be thankful for that list of things. It sounds a lot like the world we are living in right now, does it not? Who could be thankful for that and yet Paul makes it clear, I will give thanks because when everything else is pulled out from under me, it's then I realize how weak I am and I see how powerful God is. And, in my weakness he is able to work through me the strongest. That's pretty cool, that this crazy idea that Paul comes up with, fits so well for you and I. And Paul gives thanks for the storms, because without the storms we would never recognize our need for God's grace, for his sustaining presence.

In the affluence of our culture, it's easy to rely only upon our own strength. Not because we are so willful against God, but because with our comforts and our cleverness we so seldom need him and so Paul says, "I give thanks. I give thanks to be weak or insulted or mistreated or to have troubles and sufferings." Hmpf, without those storms we would never recognize that in fact we do dangle from a parachute called grace, held in the hand of God. Troubled times or not, remember your parachute, because that's the best news of all. Would you pray with me?

Lord we thank you for the parachute and we thank you for the circumstances that remind us how much we need you and need your grace. Help us give thanks in ALL things. Amen.