

Sermon for Trinity Episcopal Church Proper 9, 2018

"...to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me.... 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."

This letter from Paul has everything you'd want for good drama. There's intrigue as Paul suffers challenges from other so-called apostles. There are tales of two people's ecstatic visions and mystical journeys. And finally, Paul's confession to a mysterious thorn in the flesh and his powerlessness. Does it get any better than this? If it's true that there are only six stories in Hollywood, this letter has at least couple of them. But now that we have the stories before us, what do they mean for our lives?

Earlier this morning, Paul writes about two people who had remarkable mystical experiences, one so astonishing that the person could not put the encounter into speech. It's important we notice that Paul doesn't cast doubt on either story; he has no hesitation they occurred. One of these two persons, fourteen years before, was taken to paradise by Christ. And the other person was caught up into a great mystery and as I said, couldn't even talk about what they saw. I've heard modern people make light of these two reports, but Paul doesn't; perhaps we shouldn't either. Think about all of the accounts of people who have had near-death experiences and the things they've seen? Or the stories of those who have returned from a heavenly encounter? Time and again these stories grab out attention with news reports and even scientific studies. What do we learn from these stories? If we want to be like Paul, we must be open minded.

There's plenty more from which we can learn in the Second Letter to the Corinthians. But more than being open-minded, I want to focus this morning on Paul's "thorn in the flesh." Paul's eternal "thorn." I cannot even begin to tell you how much ink has been consumed over Paul's expression, 'thorn in the flesh' and the 'weakness' the thorn spawned. Over the past century and a half, philosophers and psychiatrists, theologian and bible scholars, even preachers have weighed in on the 'thorn' and what it indicated. On the basis of the flimsiest of evidence people have suggested the "thorn" signifies everything from epilepsy to TB to some form of malaria. Why? Because Paul said he prayed to God three times and that the "three times" must refer to episodes. Reoccurring epilepsy, TB and malarial attacks. Really? I don't know about you, but I've prayed to God many more than three times about challenges and that doesn't mean the trials only occurred three

times! One psychiatrist suggested that Paul's harrowing conversion experience was the result of a mental breakdown. To the psychiatrist's mind, the "thorn" Paul writes about must have been the anxiety produced by the conversion. And that's just a couple of examples of what people think the "thorn" might have been.

We can't fully understand this letter or even Paul's entire ministry until we understand WHY God gave Paul this thorn, whatever it might be. Paul reports that God gave him the affliction for a very, very important reason—because Jesus said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." There's part of the very core of Paul—that he discovers perfection in his weakness. Paradoxically, there's very little in Paul's life as important as this, that he discover perfection through his weakness.

We're going to need to wander over into the Greek dictionary for a moment. When most modern people talk about "perfect," we mean perfection on a scale of one to ten. One being the least perfect and ten the most. I'm delighted to report that I am married to the perfect woman, a true ten. And I think bicycling is the perfect sport, a ten among swimming, skiing and running. But compared to New Testament ideas of perfection, the modern concept of perfection makes for thin soup. Compare this: "perfection" in the ancient world, meant something different. 'Perfection' in the New Testament world is what's achieved when all the pieces are brought together to make a whole. A great example we all know is assembling a picture puzzle; no puzzle is done until the last piece is in place. Miss a piece because someone misplaced it, or Little Jack our Boston Terrier ate it, and you can't achieve perfection. Find the piece and you've found perfection. It's the same feeling when you have an assembly of friends—without that one valued friend, you're not a perfect circle. So, perfection in this sense is completion, the fulfilling of purpose and a sense of gathering. And unlike perfection on a scale of one to ten, which by its of definition is often unachievable, we can achieve the perfection of purpose by simply gathering all the pieces. That's what Paul has in mind when he writes about perfection found in weakness.

Knowing about biblical perfection, then you can get a far better sense of what Paul means by 'power made perfect in weakness'. When Paul writes that the thorn has created this weakness, Paul is acknowledging that he alone, by himself, is insufficient to the Apostolic task. Paul the individual may seem powerful, but the thorn in his side reminds him that his mission work cannot and should not be done by himself. So, paradoxically, Paul gains strength when he works with everyone. Paul becomes powerful when he's joined to Christ and to his fellow Christians. And when everyone is gathered, when the circle is perfected, made complete and whole, we discover our strength only because of our original weakness.

Let me give you an example. Here in Central Oregon we have one of the most noble of trees, the Douglas fir. The Douglas fir has an amazing facility—as its roots stretch out tendrils seeking nourishment, when it discovers other Douglas fir roots, the roots join as one entity. In fact, Doug firs can cooperate with such strength that when a stand of them is threatened by a mudslide, they hold “hands,” roots that is, and ski down the hill together! A single Douglas fir is a dangerous thing however, no matter how mighty it appears. Years ago, I bought a house in Portland that had been cut in half by a Douglas fir. Yes, I got a good price. The previous owners had even sent out a Christmas card; the card showed the house cut in half with the caption, “Next year, we bring the tree through the front door!” Neighbors later told me that originally there had been a whole stand of Douglas firs and that the developer building the house had left only one. And one Douglas fir by itself, cannot be powerful in its weakness.

There’s a critical point Paul’s making even for our time of radical individualism. It’s simply this: no one can be a Christian all by themselves. We are made Christians, powerful Christians, even perfect Christians when we join hands with those around us and perfect ourselves. By ourselves, one by one, we have flaws and are sometimes weak. We may not be at all strong. But we are made strong and beautiful and perfect by the sustaining embrace of Christ and other Christians. Let me put it this way: I cannot be a Christian without all of you. Simply, I cannot be me without you, and you and you. Amen.

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