

7th Sunday after Pentecost
2 Corinthians 12: 2-10
July 9, 2018

Bridge of Thorn

Years ago, at an interdenominational conference, I was standing amongst a group of fellow pastors, chewing the ecclesiastical fat. As a way of introducing ourselves, we described the congregations we were serving. It didn't take long before the demon of competition reared its ugly head.

"How many do you worship on a Sunday?" my colleague asked. (Those were his exact words. I'm not making this up.). "We worship around 450. How about you? How many do *you* worship?"

If you needed evidence of the timeliness of today's Epistle reading, there it is. Paul's struggle to compete with the so-called "super-apostles" is as old as the church itself and as relevant as tomorrow's headlines. Not only does Second Corinthians contain a striking distillation of a major theme of Paul's theology, it is also President Trump's favorite book of the Bible. (Why, I'm not sure. Perhaps it's because Chapter 12 all about boasting and the nature of true strength.)

One of Paul's goals in his letter to the church in Corinth is to convince the Corinthians that they are being led astray by a group of charismatic leaders who are skillful orators but ill-formed theologians. They're good on their feet, attractive to look at, and able to tell mesmerizing stories about their own spiritual experiences. Paul calls them "**false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles to Christ,**" bogus "**angels of light.**" Their version of the good news is in fact "fake news" because it lacks the cross of Jesus Christ.

So, how does Paul make his case? He does it by meeting the super-apostles on their own turf. "This is going to sound foolish because it is foolish," he tells his audience, "but since these guys are all about boasting, well, I can out-boast the lot of them."

And so, he does. His opponents flash their religious bona fides. Paul can top that. He is, as he tells the Philippians, a Hebrew among Hebrews. Circumcised on the eighth day. Tribe of Benjamin, Phi Beta Kappa from U. P. – the University of Pharisees – he's got it all.

As for faithfulness, check out his C.V. Flogged five times. Beaten with rods three times. Stoned once. Shipwrecked thrice. Battered by the elements. In constant danger from Gentiles and from his own people. Lowered over a wall in a basket in the middle of the night. Nobody, but nobody, has suffered more for the sake of the gospel than Paul. At least, no one who has lived to tell about it.

And in chapter 12, he reaches the climax of this admittedly foolish boasting. The super-apostles brag about their ecstatic experiences. Well, says Paul, I know a guy who was caught up to the third heaven. He experienced Paradise itself, this unnamed friend of mine. He could tell you things about being in the presence of the Holy One that would blow your mind – things no mortal is permitted to speak about. That guy would have every right to boast, wouldn't he?

Well, writes Paul, so could I. But I won't.

At this point, Paul takes off the fool's cap he has been wearing, the cap of boasting and preening and bragging about how many people you worship in your setting, and how big your budget is, and how successful your youth program is, and how many kids you're taking to Dogwood Acres, and all the rest.

I won't boast, says Paul, because life has taken me down a notch. I have this problem – **a thorn in the flesh** I call it. I used to think it came straight from Satan himself, and maybe it did. I prayed three times to the Lord that it be taken from me, but it didn't leave. And that's the best thing that could have happened to me, because in the midst of that struggle to be free of that thorn, God said to me, "**My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.**"¹

We don't know the particulars of Paul's thorn in the flesh. Probably the Corinthians knew. Whatever its name, I have come to think I know another name for Paul's thorn. It's his humanity. It's his brokenness. It's the problem he cannot solve on his own. It's his fleshly imperfection for which there is no cure save grace and grace alone.

¹ 2 Corinthians 12:9

How about you? What is your thorn in the flesh?

- Is it the pain of being unable to ease the pain of someone you love?
- Is it a past you carry with you and would like to shed, but cannot because it is now ingrained in your soul?
- Is it your failure to achieve the goals someone else set for you before you could choose for yourself?
- Is it simply the awareness of your woundedness, your brokenness, and your need for grace that cannot be earned but can only be received?

Paul learned that God does not always take that thorn away, for it could be a means of grace. God does not take pleasure in anyone's suffering, but God does want us to know the fullness of our own humanity. Only in our weakness do we discover God's perfect strength. With the thorn comes the grace that is sufficient for the moment.

The **thorn in the flesh**, whatever its name, is what each of us encounters in the process of living life *in the flesh*, not in the rarefied atmosphere of ecstatic experience, not in escapist forms of religious practice, not in the "virtual reality" offered by technology, but in the flesh of real life. Not in some heavenly realm where pain cannot reach, but in the flesh where grace is required and only grace will suffice.

Acknowledging his **thorn in the flesh** is Paul's way of saying he is not a super-apostle. He's not a super anything. He's a human being, just like Jesus. Jesus, the man of sorrows. Jesus, the crucified one. Jesus, the Son of Man. Jesus, the Word *made flesh*.

Paul first met Jesus in a vision on the road to Damascus. He met him again through the pain of that thorn in his flesh. Therefore, Paul does not aspire to be a super-apostle. He boasts of nothing save his own weakness. He doesn't preach the fake good news proclaimed by his rivals. He preaches the foolishness of the cross, for "**the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom.**"²

² 1 Corinthians 1:25

In my first year of seminary, I was assigned to a nursing home to make visits. “Just go to the nurse’s station,” I was told, “Ask if they know anyone who might like a visit.”

So, I did. The nurse looked me up and down. I’m sure she noticed my knees knocking together. It was my first pastoral call.

“Room 123,” she said. “Her name is Ann.”

The door was open. There was no need to knock. In the bed was a lady in her eighties. She obviously had some kind of respiratory problem. She was sitting up in bed, hunched over, trying hard to catch her breath.

My twin sister had died not long before I made that first pastoral call. Brenda died of lung cancer, although she had never smoked a single cigarette. The thorny memory of her last few days of life washed over me as I entered that room and tried to catch my own breath.

I was seeing Brenda in that bed, which you might think would send me down the hall and out the front door, but it didn’t. It drew me in. The thorn became a bridge. A means of grace. An invitation for the two of us to meet on the level playing field of our shared humanity.

And despite my awkwardness and lack of pastoral experience, Ann and I had a good visit. It turned out that we had more in common than either of us knew. Not a common strength. A common weakness which made us both a little stronger.

“So, writes Paul, “I will boast all the more gladly of my weakness, so the power of Christ may dwell in me.”³

Did you ever hear such foolishness? Did you ever hear such wisdom?

Do you hear, right now, the Good News?

³ 2 Corinthians 12:9