

Pentecost 5B Proper 9, Sermon July 5, 2009  
2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10; Psalm 48  
2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13

In the name of one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

The great twentieth century Anglican writer, C. S. Lewis once wrote,

If you look for truth you may find comfort in the end; if you look for comfort, you will get neither comfort nor truth, only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin with and, in the end, despair.

That is a great setting for the message we can draw from this morning's reading from St. Paul.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Letter to the Corinthians is a response to a tough time for the Apostle Paul. To his way of thinking, he had been "wronged," by this community that he loved. And so he wrote a letter to them which spends much of its time and effort simply proving that he *is* an Apostle.

This morning we pick up on the letter after Paul has challenged the notion that there might be some Apostle who is greater than he (Paul) is in the eyes of God. He has derisively referred to St. Peter, St. James and other original Disciples as "super Apostles," and at the end of chapter 11 he lists all the things he has been through on behalf of the Gospel. It is a list of trials and tortures that would put anyone else's to shame. With this background, we hear Paul as he tells the Corinthians about an otherworldly revelation of God. He tells the story as if it happened to someone else, but scholars almost universally agree that he is talking about himself when he says that he went to heaven and heard things that other persons have not. And then, as soon as he has

finished bragging about his accomplishments – both those that were of his own making and those the he endured – he immediately says, “to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, ...”

There has been a great deal written about what St. Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” was. The truth is; no one knows what it was. Speculation has run the gamut from, epilepsy to stuttering to depression to vision problems. But what *is* important for our purposes is that whatever this “thorn,” was; it was something that Paul believed to be put there to challenge him and his faith. He says that this thorn was put in his flesh to keep him from being too “elated” with all that God had shown him and with the gifts God had given him. Another way to say that is that the thorn was put in his flesh to stop his ego from completely running away with him.

But Paul says that the real result of this affliction was to make him reassess his faith. He says that he asked God – on three different occasions – to remove the affliction. And all three times, he was met with the same response, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” C.S. Lewis said, if you look for comfort, you will get neither comfort nor truth. But if you look for truth, you may well receive comfort.

**My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.**

This week I read something that Fr. Robert Lebron, Rector of Trinity Episcopal Church in Janesville Wisconsin, wrote on St. Paul’s statement of power made perfect in

weakness. I hope Fr. Lebron doesn't mind his message being used way down here in Texas. He began by quoting from a story in the Washington Post and said,

Army SSGT Hilbert Caesar thought that his life was over when a bomb went off on a road near Baghdad in the Fall of 2005. Caesar was in charge of a ... 150mm Howitzer – a self-propelled gun that resembles a tank. He was out on patrol in Iraq when a roadside bomb exploded. When the smoke cleared, Caesar looked down and saw that his right leg was severed in three places, ... dangling by the skin. ... Then he yelled for the Howitzer hatches to be closed, and thought to himself, 'Oh man. This is it. My life is over.'

But he didn't die. (Later) At Walter Reed Hospital, his missing limb was replaced with an artificial leg of plastic and steel. Still, he felt despair about his future. .... (Then, in the midst of the despair) He received word that eight men from his platoon had been killed by a car bomb in Baghdad, including one of his role models. The news was devastating. (But) As Hilbert Caesar says, 'It makes me appreciate life a whole lot more.'

...

Power is made perfect in weakness. As Tom McNish, a former Air Force pilot who was a prisoner in North Vietnam reflects: 'There is no question in my mind that the experience I had in Vietnam has had an overall effect on my life.' Not that McNish recommends it for anyone else. Or that he would want to do it again. It was truly a time of suffering, after all. But you can't have post-traumatic growth without trauma.

Think of a time when you have experienced spiritual growth. A shift in priorities. An increase in personal strength. A renewed appreciation for life. A deepening of personal relationships. Have these improvements been the result of smooth sailing and easy living? ... (No.) These kinds of growth come from stress, struggle and suffering.

... (While we may not ever want trauma in our lives; if we allow it – and we draw power from our faith community – good will often come from trauma.)

***(T)rauma moves us from isolation to community. And ..., trauma shifts us from self-reliance to God-reliance.***

...

In the life of the church, it is ... (almost always) trauma that moves us from isolation to community. Sure, festivities can be fun, but their effect is

usually superficial. What binds us together as members of the Body of Christ are illness, grief, struggle, adversity, confusion and crisis.

Weakness is common to all of us. ... But there is also incredible strength as found when the Hilbert Caesar (the Apostle Paul) in all of us finds a living faith that takes hold of the wounds of Christ.

**My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.**

On this day when we stop to remember our hard won American independence, I don't pretend to have endured the kinds of hellish torments that our wounded veterans have endured – and continue to suffer. And I certainly don't mean to compare my own situation to that of the Apostle Paul, as he was writing to the Corinthians. But over the last few months I have most definitely endured my own “thorn,” in the flesh – and in my spirit. I am still a work in progress, but the power of God in Christ – the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit – has become more perfect in me over this time than at any other time in my life.

I know that there are many of you here this morning who are also enduring physical, emotional and spiritual thorns in your own flesh. Whether it be illness; or a loved one who has a problem that you cannot help them with; or money worries; or employment problems; I can tell you from personal experience, God's grace is sufficient for you. God's power is made perfect in weakness, if you will only allow it to be.

C. S. Lewis put it this way; there are two kinds of people. “Those who say, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, “*thy* will be done.<sup>1</sup>” In your times of

---

<sup>1</sup> [The Great Divorce](#)

difficulty, turn to your faith, as lived out in this community, to draw on for strength. I don't agree with Pastor Rick Warren on many issues, but I've got to give it to him for the way he begins his multi-million dollar book, A Purpose Driven Life. He says, "It's not about you." ... "If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God." In other words, quit trying to find something within yourself – some great well of personal strength – to draw on when times get tough. Instead, start with a complete reliance on God's grace, which will be sufficient for you. When things get tough, rely on God and the workings of God's people in this church to give you strength.

**“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”**

Remember

It's not about you. It's not about us.

It's not about him. It's not about her.

It's not about your boss. And it's not about loss

It's not about work. It's not about play.

It's not about money. It's not about the economy.

It's not about your parents. It's not about your kids.

It's not about your wife. It's not about your husband.

It's not about your friends. It's not about your enemies.

It's all about God.

That's right.

It's all about God.<sup>2</sup>

And that's sufficient for all of us. Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> 21 Homiletics 4, July-August 2009, pg 11