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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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2 Corinthians 12:2-10, Mark 6:1-13
Strength in Weakness

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In this morning's sermon, I would like to lift up St. Paul's intriguing biographic note about the thorn in his flesh:

⁷And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. ⁸Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; ⁹but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:7-9, RSV)

This brief passage suggests three ideas to me: First, even for an apostle, you don't always get what you want. Second, Paul persevered in prayer. When the Lord failed to grant his prayer about the thorn in his flesh, Paul prayed again about the matter. And then again. And third, the Lord can use even our weakness.

FIRST, YOU DON'T ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU WANT.

First, even for an apostle, you don't always get what you want. Paul wanted that thorn in his flesh to leave him. He was not unclear in his prayer. He was not ambiguous or fainthearted about it. He wanted that thorn out! And who would not? Even a mighty lion would not like to go limping along with a thorn in his paw. Thorns in the flesh are crummy. They don't belong there. They hinder things. As the Pennsylvania Dutch would say, "outen the thorn!" Take it out! Remove it.

Now, we do not know in detail what St. Paul is talking about. Something troubles him. He likens it to a thorn in the flesh, which means that it is hard to endure. It need not be fatal, but it is certainly bothersome and distracting. Paul could probably make the case that whatever this thorn is, it is hindering his ministry and so he prays that it leave him. Apparently, as he sorts things out, it would be better for him to be relieved of this thorn, and so he prays for that.

Some commentators speculate that Paul is referring to some physical ailment or perhaps even some sadness of soul. Perhaps Paul suffers from headaches or stomach problems or even from depression. They say that Martin Luther fought with depression throughout his career. It certainly did not hinder his productivity, but still, a tendency to depression is a heavy burden to bear. If Paul suffers from

some physical ailment or from some spiritual sadness, who could blame him for praying for release?

But I think we can go beyond such speculations if we look at the context for Paul's saying about the thorn in his side. Paul is contending for his apostolic authority. He seems reluctant to do it, but he must praise *himself*, in order to commend himself to the Corinthians. Those Corinthians were inheritors of the splendid Greek oratorical tradition. They like a good speech. But apparently, St. Paul was not a particularly impressive preacher. He even records the dismissive saying about him:

¹⁰... 'His letters are weighty enough, and full of strength, but when you see him in person, he makes no impression and his powers of speaking are negligible.' (2 Corinthians 10:10, NJB)

Such a report would hurt the feelings of many a preacher. But for St. Paul, the troubling thing here is not the blow to his personal ego, but the threat such talk poses for his ministry. He is desperate that the Corinthian church should not be misled by what he calls the "super apostles." These are new preachers on the scene. They are more impressive than he is, and that would be okay, except that they are teaching a new gospel. But there is no new gospel! There is only the gospel Paul had taught them about Jesus Christ and the way of the Cross. If the thorn in his side, then, are the super apostles, you can understand Paul praying that they would go away. He fears them because he views them as false shepherds.

And if we expand the context even more, we can come to another grave thorn in the flesh for St. Paul. I mean the reluctance of his own people - the Jews - to come to faith in Jesus. Paul grieves over this to the utmost. In fact, in his letter to the Romans Paul testifies that he would trade anything - apparently even his own soul - for the salvation of the Jews:

¹I am speaking the truth in Christ-- I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit-- ²I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. (Romans 9:1-3, NRSV)

So you see, when Paul prays for the removing of the thorn in his flesh, he might well have been praying for a weighty matter. Yet, he did not get what he wanted.

SECOND, PAUL WAS A MAN OF PRAYER

Second, let us not lose sight of the fact that Paul was a man of prayer. He admits that his prayer has not been granted, but he can be in such a state only because he was a person of prayer to begin with. Something troubled him. He called it a “thorn in the flesh.” So, he dashed off his prayers to the Lord about it. He did not suffer in silence. Instead, he turned to his heavenly Father in prayer. And when the prayer was not granted, he knocked on heaven’s door a second time. And then a third.

Paul taught the necessity of constant prayer:

¹²Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. (Romans 12:12, RSV)

¹⁸Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication... (Ephesians 6:18, RSV)

⁶Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. (Philippians 4:6, RSV)

¹⁷Pray without ceasing. (1 Thessalonians 5:17, KJV)

But together with these apostolic exhortations to prayer, we also have St. Paul’s important teaching in Romans 8 about the Holy Spirit interceding for us as we pray. As I read that passage aloud, think of St. Paul and his prayer for the removal of the thorn in his flesh. The passage goes this way:

²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; *for we do not know how to pray as we ought*, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. ²⁸We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:26-28, NRSV)

So, Paul prays his prayer about the thorn in his flesh. Naturally he would! The thorn hurts, so like a child going to his heavenly Father, he prays for the removal of the thorn. But in the back of his mind there must have been his great teaching about the frailty of human prayer – the way “we do not know how to pray as we ought.” He prays that the thorn should be gone! but he knows that maybe that is not the best prayer. But he is not discouraged because he believes that the Holy Spirit prays along with him. The Spirit intercedes for him “with sighs too deep for

words.” And he trusts that the intercessions of the Spirit are wise and fully worthy of being granted. So, he trusts the matter over to the Lord. He has done what he can: he has brought his earnest petition to the Lord. And now he is willing to abide by the will of the Lord. I believe that someday, when he can see the whole scope of the Lord’s good work, he will see that his prayer was granted *according to his deepest needs*. For now, all he knows is that he would be glad for the removing of the thorn in his flesh. But also he is willing to trust the word of the Lord that his grace is sufficient for him.

You and I should pray in like manner as did St. Paul. We should pray in perfect confidence that the Lord will hear the prayer and grant it according to his wisdom and understanding of our deepest needs.

Luther believed that too. He believed that prayer is not optional for the Christian for many reasons, including this one: that the Lord promises to grant the prayer:

...what ought to impel and arouse us to pray all the more is the fact that God has made and affirmed a promise: that what we pray is a certain and sure thing. As he says in Psalm 50[:15], “Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you,” and Christ says in the Gospel in Matthew 7[:7–8], “Ask, and it will be given you,” etc. . . . “For everyone who asks receives.” Such promises certainly ought to awaken and kindle in our hearts a longing and love for prayer. For by his Word, God testifies that our prayer is heartily pleasing to him and will assuredly be heard and granted, so that we may not despise it, cast it to the winds, or pray uncertainly.

You can hold such promises up to him and say, “Here I come, dear Father, and pray not of my own accord nor because of my own worthiness, but at your commandment and promise, which cannot fail or deceive me.” Those who do not believe such a promise should again realize that they are angering God, grossly dishonoring him, and accusing him of lying. (Luther’s *Large Catechism*, “On Prayer.”)

THIRD: THE LORD CAN USE EVEN OUR WEAKNESS

My third note about our text is that Paul receives a word of encouragement from the Lord that only the Lord could give:

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Corinthians 12:9, RSV)

No earthly king would say this to a declining knight. No President would say this to a declining general. “My power is made perfect in weakness.” Strange combination of words here: “power” in “weakness.” The earthly king would not say this to an increasingly feeble knight, and the President would not say it to the General grown too old for the job, for the earthly king and President depend upon the strength of the knight and the general. But the Lord does not depend on the *strength* of St. Paul or of any Christian. He simply depends on our *faithfulness*. He has the strength. From us he asks for faithfulness.

This past week, I had a birthday. I turned sixty-one. As I grow older, I find that birthdays become a time for reflection and a kind of taking stock of myself. In certain ways, I think I am doing well enough. My health is good. My weight is moderate. I wake up each morning and do my sit ups and stretches. I am thoughtful about what I eat. I do not smoke or drink. For a man of my generation, I think I am pretty fit.

But then, there is that phrase: “for a man of my generation.” Yes, for a sixty-one year old man, I am fairly fit. But also I am mindful that I am not as strong as I was when I was young. Everything seems to be in decline. I cannot jump as high as I used to. I never used to need eyeglasses for reading. Take off my glasses, and things were perfectly clear and sharp. But not so much anymore. My hearing declines. In fact, now I wear hearing aids, for which I am awfully grateful. I am more and more aware of my weakness as I grow older.

Such things are so for Roman Catholic clergy too. One result of a clergy shortage is that as Catholic priests age and as their strength declines, their responsibilities remain very high. They do not have so many younger priests to help them or to take over for them.

So, I think about myself and others in the ordained ministry. But even more, I think of my younger brother, Philip. When Carol returns from climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro and from her mission visits in Tanzania, we are heading down to the Baltimore area to take care of my brother while his wife helps their daughter move into graduate school in New Orleans. Philip is on our prayer list, for which I am grateful. He suffers from MS - Multiple sclerosis – which in his case has meant relentless decline. That is not true for all MS people, but it is for him.

I am mindful of weakness, then, in myself and others. Can we still be useful? I believe so. That is why I am so grateful for the encouraging word from the Lord received by St. Paul:

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in *weakness*.” (2 Corinthians 12:9, RSV)

This is a mystery. The Lord will reveal the whole truth of it someday. Till then, I think we have enough experience of the world to know that even the weak can be useful to the Lord and advance his kingdom. Their prayers, for example, wing their way to heaven and I think they especially touch the heart of the Lord. It means a lot to me, for example, that Ann Siemer, 96 years old off there at the

Plattduetsche Home, prays for us. The weak often have one great advantage: they know that *all of us* are weak. They can see it and have sympathy for others. All of humanity forms one large band of wounded soldiers carrying each other along as best we can. Sin, death, and the devil take their toll on each of us. I bet that even Michael Jordan will reach a stage where he cannot leap so high. Even Arnold Schwarzenegger will reach the stage where he cannot pump so much iron.

The thing that especially strikes me about this morning's Gospel Lesson is the weakness which Jesus requires of his disciples as he sends them forth two by two. The text does not speak of their advantages, but of their weaknesses:

⁸He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. (Mark 6:8-9, RSV)

Why such poverty? Why did Jesus send them out with such meager provision? Perhaps the best answer is that all that can be asked of any of us is that we seek to follow Jesus and his way of the Cross as best we can. Jesus was a poor man, with nowhere to lay his head. Jesus was a man of no great power. He commanded no army. No brave knights answered to him. He simply walked the roads of Palestine doing good works and bringing people to his heavenly Father.

So, St. Paul has some thorn in his flesh. That is a small matter, and Paul knows it, compared to the crown of thorns pressed down into the brow of Jesus. And Paul has some kind of thorn in his side. But in this, he follows the pattern of Jesus, who had a very physical and brutal spear thrust into his side.

Jesus can use our weakness. He does not seek strength from us, but rather faithfulness. He himself has the strength. What he asks of us is that we peddle onwards, whether we be strong or weak. Follow on after him, offering our best to him and his way of the Cross, till in his great strength, he raises us up to strength and glory too in his kingdom, where he reigns as God forever, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.