

THORN IN THE FLESH

II Corinthians 12:2-10

One day a horse escaped into the hills and when the farmer's neighbors learned of it, they sympathized with him over his bad luck. The farmer replied, "Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?" A week later the horse returned with a herd of wild horses from the hills and this time the neighbors congratulated the farmer on his good luck. His reply was, "Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?"

Then, when the farmer's son was attempting to tame one of the wild horses, he fell off its back and broke his leg. Everyone thought this very bad luck. Not the farmer, whose only reaction was, "Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?" Some weeks later the army marched into the village and conscripted into the army every able-bodied youth they found there. When they saw the farmer's son with his broken leg they let him off. Now was that good luck? Bad luck? Who knows? Is the thorn in the flesh bad luck or good luck? Who knows.

Paul began by speaking of reasons he could boast. Notions of grandiosity – I had a vision of paradise and I was in it playing third base for the Red Sox – lead us to fantasy and dysfunction. Over the years our sons played sports I met many coaches who believed that they should have made it big – college to the pros, but they had a knee injury, they had a bad coach, they had a bad game at just the wrong time. One poll found that eighty per cent of men rate themselves as above average athletically. These are likely to be the coaches who stand there yelling at 10-year-olds because they missed a ground ball or didn't swing at a called third strike.

Jesus had the most trouble with inflated egos, those who were quite sure of themselves, who knew more than anyone else and were quite certain anyone who disagreed was simply wrong. But there is nothing like that thorn in the flesh to give us a good dose of humility. Paul had plenty of reason to brag but he told of his ecstatic experience. Being caught up in some spiritual world he spoke of it in the third person – like it happened to someone else. What he could boast of was unimportant. It was the thorn – his weakness – that led him to depend on Christ.

It is not known just what this thorn was to which Paul referred but there is a lot of speculation. Perhaps his eyesight had been damaged by all those

beatings and stonings he had experienced, which might explain his mention elsewhere of the distinctiveness of his oversized handwriting. Some have suggested that St. Paul suffered from epileptic seizures as may have happened on that Damascus road. It might have been migraine headaches or a malarial fever common in the eastern Mediterranean area.

Some have suggested that Paul's thorn in the flesh was his wife. Maybe that was why he was on the road all the time. We know that Paul wrote those who are not married are better off that way, but he also advised that it is better to marry than to burn. Who knows what his problem was? Thorns come in all shapes and sizes: migraine headaches, bad backs, arthritis, depression, anxiety, shingles, an unhappy marriage, an impossible boss, an addiction, a child.

Cartoonist Gary Larson used to do the Farside cartoons. In one he pictured a woman sitting on an overstuffed sofa, her hair in curlers. In her right hand she was holding a broom. In the left hand she held the phone and said, "Well, that is the way it happens, Sylvia. I kissed this frog, he turned into a prince, we got married and wham – I am stuck at home with a bunch of Pollywogs."

What Paul does make clear is that whatever the "thorn" was, it had not been placed in him by God. It had originated as "a messenger of Satan to torment me." It was neither a divinely imposed punishment for some failing nor a burden placed upon him by God to teach him some lesson. It served a critical part of his life of faith.

We do know that he wanted to get rid of it, and many times he must have said, "If only I did not have to suffer this pain all would be well with my life." But we do not know that. What would happen if we never suffered any physical pain? We would never know when our appendix was infected until it burst. Pain and suffering have their place.

I remember from childhood feeling a sharp pain piercing my flesh. I was 10 years old. It was before the Salk and Sabine vaccines for polio. Parents took whatever precautions they could by limiting where children swam and the like. They were on the lookout for any symptoms their children had. I started to have symptoms of polio, especially weakness and pain. I still remember the visit to the hospital where dad parked the car and I was too

weak to walk and I heard someone say out loud, “Isn’t he too big to be carried.”

I remember the test which involved a spinal tap – a needle in my spine without anesthetic. I was told by the nurse it would just feel like a mosquito bite. The nurse lied. In the end there was good news and bad news. The good news was that I did not have polio. The bad news was that I had a serious case of mononucleosis. And that meant one long boring summer.

I remember my last serious pain in my flesh which involved a gall bladder attack and an ambulance ride and I will spare you all the messy details. My point is simply this. Most all of us can give a history of physical pain we have endured. We can show the scars from accidents and from surgery. We all have a history of painful personal failure. We believe things should be better but they are not and we ask God why. Last week Reverend Mitchell lifted up the words of Psalm 42 which asked why God seemed far away from him. As the thorn rips our flesh we seldom feel grateful but often ask why.

Our culture is much like the culture of the first century in which Paul wrote these words, a culture which values comfort and ease and luxury. We do not, as a culture, value discomfort unless we know we benefit from it. We will diet to loose weight and exercise to stay healthy. But the thorn in the flesh does not seem like a benefit so we want it gone and when it does not go it seems wrong. We believe in the pursuit of happiness, but Paul said we are to embrace what does not make us happy.

Paul rejects the common notions about power and self-sufficiency and pleasure, and followed the way he learned when Christ came to him: In Christ weakness equals power. In lifting others up, we lift ourselves. When experiencing sorrow, we discover joy. When we are last, we are first. When we die, we live. Paul was saying in effect, “I could boast as you boast, but this little thorn in the flesh has helped me get over myself.”

Paul’s concern was not with what he suffered but why he suffered. I love this quote: “Jesus can turn water into wine, but he cannot change your whining into anything.” (Mark Steele) The next time you find yourself complaining remember this: “Jesus can turn water into wine, but he cannot change your whining into anything.” Whatever our thorn is it should not be

a source of shame or a source of pride or a source of anger or a source of whining. Satan is testing us and God has the answer to the test.

Whenever he was weak, whenever he was tormented by this thorn in the flesh, Paul remembered that the greatest of all powers belong to God, not to human beings. The power to heal, the power to forgive, the power to renew, the power to inspire, the power to create, the power to love — all of these things come from God.

Earlier in this letter Paul wrote (4:7-10, 16-18): “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

So do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.”

Abraham Lincoln faced huge obstacles during his presidency and confronted seemingly impossible difficulties during the Civil War. He said, “Often I was driven to my knees in prayer by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to turn.” “When I am weak,” said Paul, “then I am strong.” When we are driven to our knees it is there we meet Christ.

We are each tormented with some physical or emotional affliction. But the affliction is not without purpose. Satan gives us this “thorn in the flesh” but from it we learn in our weakness to depend on the strength of God.

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve. I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey. I asked for health, that I might do great things. I was given infirmity, that I might do better things. I asked for riches, that I might be happy. I was given poverty, that I might be wise. I asked for power, that I might have the praise of others. I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God. I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life. I was given life, that I might enjoy all things. I got nothing I asked for but everything I had hoped for.

We lift up the prayers of our hearts for those still burdened, those seeking healing, those in need within the church and the world. God of mercy and healing, you who hear the cries of those in need, receive these petitions of your people that all who are troubled may know peace, comfort, and courage.

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The Federated Church of Hyannis

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