

Pentecost 7, July 7, 2024 (Mk 6:1-33; 2 Cor 12:2-10; Ps 123; Ezek 2:1-5)

One of my favorite verses in all of scripture is from today's reading in Second Corinthians, when God says to Paul, **My grace is sufficient for you.**

Paul has been bending God's ear because of what he calls *a thorn in his flesh*. He wants God to take it away. Three times he's asked—and this is God's final answer: **My grace is sufficient for you.**

The New Testament tells us a lot about Paul. He's a Jew born of the tribe of Benjamin, circumcised according to the Law on the eighth day. He's a Pharisee, zealous to uphold the Law, which he prides himself on keeping. In fact, in his zeal for the Law he persecuted Christians, believing them to be heretics and blasphemers.

Then God got his attention on the road to Damascus, where he was blinded by a light from heaven and heard Jesus calling out to him. He gave up his former name, Saul, and became as zealous *for* Christ as he had been *against* the early Church.

Around that same time, Paul had an out-of-body experience. He was **caught up to the third heaven**, where he heard **unrepeatable things**. He doesn't want to sound like he's boasting about this, so he tells the story as if it had happened to someone else.

In those days pagans, Jews, and Christians all believed in multiple heavens. In English we have the expression *seventh heaven*, which refers to the highest possible state of bliss. Paul has a "close encounter of the *third* kind"—he was taken up to the *third heaven*, or *paradise*, the heavenly equivalent of the Garden of Eden.

Even though Paul hasn't mentioned this for fourteen years, and speaks of it now in the third person, it's obvious he felt pretty special because God singled him out for such glory.

But pride goeth before a fall—and Paul has had his own problems since that time. He writes, **To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given to me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.** The thorn was given to squelch his pride in the fact that God chose *him* for this heavenly journey.

Zeal—thorns in the flesh—out-of-body experiences: it sounds like a prescription for fanatic faith. But the most important thing of all isn't any of these. It's God's response to Paul's prayers: **My grace is sufficient for you.**

Think of all the thorns being borne right here, today, at St. John/St. Stephen. There are thorns of grief—of betrayal—broken relationships—shame, guilt, and regret. There are thorns of lost joy, lost love, lost employment, loss of control over our circumstances. And thorns of anxiety and fear concerning the political future of our country.

Take a moment and think of a bothersome thorn in your own life. Paul calls his thorn a **messenger of Satan**. Like Job two weeks ago, persecuted by Satan, we face these distractions, these intrusions into our lives that can so easily draw us away from God.

Paul makes a point of telling us he begged God *three times* to remove his thorn. What do you suppose happened the first time? Obviously he didn't get the relief he wanted. He probably assumed that God's answer was something like, *not yet, wait awhile*.

Isn't that what we think when our fervent prayers seem to go unanswered? God invites, even *commands*, us to bring all things to him in prayer. But didn't we learn in Confirmation or catechism that God always answers prayer? The only problem is, there are three possible responses: *yes, no, or wait awhile*. It's hard to tell the difference between *no* and *wait awhile*.

I wonder how long Paul waited before pleading with the Lord a second time. William Sloane Coffin, pastor of Riverside Church in New York in the 1980's, imagines these words from God in response to Paul's next plea:

*I hear what you're saying, Paul, but let me remind you that it takes both sunshine and rain to make one of my rainbows.... Those who know nothing but prosperity and pleasure become hard and shallow. Those whose prosperity has been mixed with adversity can be kind and gracious. And civilization, Paul, from a heavenly point of view, is only a slow process of learning to be kind (The Riverside Years, William S. Coffin, vol. I, p. 330).*  
[end of quote]

Some time later Paul again prays for relief and this time, in the words of Coffin, he "discovers the true mercy of failure." This time he learns one of the most important truths of our Christian faith. God's promise is all we really need: **My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.**

This promise gives hope to every servant of the gospel: the imperfect, the demon-fighting, the disability-challenged, the stage-frightened, the guilt-ridden, the long-suffering—all of us, wherever and *however* we are. This promise reminds us that with *God*, all things are possible, because God will accomplish his perfect plan for the salvation of the world.

This promise reminds us of Jesus' words in Matthew's gospel: **Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heaven burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly of heart, and you will find rest for your soul. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light** (Mt 11:28).

This promise reminds us that Jesus is with us, even to the end of the age, and that with his faithful presence, we have everything we need to live out our lives as faithful servants of Christ.

In today's gospel Jesus sends his disciples out, two by two—never alone!—to proclaim the good news that God's weakness is stronger than human strength. That love is more powerful than greed, or self-centeredness, or material goods. That love, if we let it, can be more powerful than unjust laws, anti-biblical practices, and vicious prejudice.

The gospel message proclaims that forgiveness can melt the hardest heart, and that trust in God will see us through all the hardships and difficulties in this life. When we love God above all else, it's easier to love our neighbor as ourselves, and to do unto others as we wish they would do to us.

When we trust God's promise that his grace is sufficient for us, we learn to *see* his grace in every circumstance, and to focus less on human expectations and desires in order to trust God more.

With Paul, we can celebrate the words of the Lord: **My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.**

Thanks be to God!