

## “Thorns”

2 Corinthians 12: 2-10

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost/July 7, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Russell C. Sullivan, Jr., Transitional Pastor

Thorns. You know about those, especially if you have a rose bush or any kind of shrubbery. Small little nasty things they are that get under your skin, but they can hurt, can't they?

Paul the Apostle uses that very word to describe his own personal affliction. What was his thorn? More ink than you can imagine has been spilled over speculation about Paul's affliction. Probably it was physical. We know many people, day in and day out, who battle a physical limitation, one that will not leave them. A thorn in the flesh might also be psychological. Paul could also be quite certain and arrogant about his beliefs; it could have got him into hot water. Argumentative and stubbornness could have afflicted him. Some things about his character never changed – even after he met the risen Christ. Some things about our own character never change either.

There are lots of thorns out there. Maybe a thorn is the lasting effect of trauma inflicted by violence. There are thorns also of grief that tear at our hearts over the deaths of loved ones and that never seem to mend. There are thorns caused by broken relationships, the thorn caused by the disappointment of someone who has broken our heart. Sometimes we never get over that pain. Maybe our thorn is a lapse in judgment, a thoughtless or careless word that we have spoken. Maybe a thorn is a grudge we just love to chew on every day.

The truth about a thorn, Paul is telling us here, is that it will not go away. It is chronic. It causes pain. You cannot extract it. It belongs to the category of unfixable things. So Paul has a thorn. I invite you to think about what your thorn may be this morning.

“Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me.” Paul prayed for this thorn to be taken away. Of course, this suggests the question, “What is prayer?” We often engage prayer in formal ways, prayer in church, prayer at home, over meals, in church settings. But prayer is also an act of desperation. Maybe, out of the three times, that was Paul's first prayer about his unchangeable situation. A scream, a plea, an act of venting before God his anger. Prayer often begins with simply baring our feelings before God. There would be no dignity in this type of prayer, just brutal rawness and shattering honesty. This kind of prayer is echoed in the words of the psalmist:

But I, O Lord, cry out to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you.

O Lord, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me? (Psalm 88)

My sense is that Paul's first attempt at prayer, his catharsis of pain, received no answer, but only silence. He didn't rise from this prayer healed of his affliction, but I think he got a lot off his chest. He gave God a piece of his mind, and it was a relief for him. But knowing the character of Paul, he was not one to give up, and so he petitions the Lord a second time, and perhaps this time, purged of his anger and frustration, Paul began to hear God say something more subtle. When Paul's mind had ceased racing, perhaps he heard God say something like: “Now Paul, you are my servant, but you know rain falls on the just and unjust alike. There are many people in the world who see prayer and relationship with me as a way of getting what they want, guaranteeing their success. But I never promised you a rose garden. There are many things in the world that are unchangeable, Paul. There is immense freedom to my creation. Tsunamis, earthquakes, diseases, cruelty, unkindness—weal and woe, blessing and bane—are all woven together in the fabric of my creation. Until my kingdom finally dawns, Paul, good and bad will dwell together in many ways. But I have not forgotten you; I am with you always, Paul. Embrace your thorn, Paul. I just may have greater plans for you. This is just the beginning.”

So, the second answer Paul gets is the patience to accept what has happened to him and maybe a little humility about his place in the universe. These are the cards that life has dealt him. Thorns are what life has dealt us. Spiritual maturity begins with the acceptance of the unchangeable. Such wisdom is captured in that beautiful prayer said at AA meetings everywhere. Here's the long version of it:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;  
courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time;  
accepting hardships as the pathway to peace; taking, as [God] did, this sinful world  
as it is, not as I would have it; trusting that [God] will make all things right

if I surrender to his will; that I may be reasonably happy in this life  
and supremely happy with [God] forever in the next. Amen. (Source unknown)

And then Paul prays a third time and receives an answer he did not expect: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” Now there’s an answer that needs unpacking. It reminds me of the story of a woman who was searching for the perfect birthday card for her husband. She came across a promising one. On the outside it read: “Sweetheart, you’re the answer to my prayers.” Then she turned to the inside, which was inscribed: “You’re not what I prayed for exactly, but apparently you’re the answer.” What is this answer that Paul has been given? Let’s brush up on his context. He is writing his letters to a most challenging church. Most scholars say that Paul is struggling with a group of people, the super apostles, who have come to Corinth preaching their version of the Gospel. They claim that they have a special connection to God, the hot line to the Lord. And they don’t think Paul can even begin to compare to them. Perhaps they have observed this thorn. Maybe indeed it is physical, a limp, a stammer, a personality quirk, and they have deemed him insufficient to proclaim the Gospel. They brag about their prayer life, their mystical experiences. We have all known that in the church there are folk who think they are spiritually superior or that their experience of God is normative for all. There are spiritual giants who know that they are giants!

Well, Paul says to them: “Well, I can brag too. I have been to the third heaven; I was caught up into Paradise, and heard things that I am not going to repeat to you. I have all the spiritual bona fides that you have. But I have one more thing that you don’t have, and I could boast about that too.” And that’s when Paul talks about his struggling prayer life, and the strange answer he received to his prayer about his thorn: “Paul,” God says, “Forget about perfection, I cannot take your difficulty away. Instead, I will transform what has happened to you to be a blessing to others. Your thorn will bring glory to me. My grace will be sufficient, and my power will be known in your weakness. Your thorn will be my rose.”

There is a story of a young man, named Josh, the perfect high school senior. He worked part-time at McDonalds, and because he worked the late shift on the weekends he was responsible for emptying gallons and gallons of hot, crusty oil out of the deep fryer. One night the drain got clogged, and so he used a coat hanger to ream out all the gunk to get the flow going again. Because he had kneeled and was under the fryer, when the drain suddenly re-opened, it gushed all down his neck, shoulders, and back. Josh was rushed to the ER with second- and third-degree burns. He later went through numerous skin grafts and spent the better part of a year in physical therapy. He mostly recovered. Mostly. There was still enough nerve damage and discolored skin remaining to remind Josh forever of his frailty and his limitations. Today Josh is a physical therapist. His calling in life emerged out of his physical setback. And his power as a therapist will be forever rooted in his weakness. Not only does he help others to recover from accidents and diseases, he identifies with their challenges. Power is made perfect in weakness.

The strange workings of God. Thorns. We all have them. Imperfections of body, mind, and even spirit. Or maybe simply being bold for God can end up being a thorn in our side. And maybe too our sins are out there to be seen by others; and what people say about us is true, and our thorn is our shame or self-doubt. We all have thorns. And we want them gone, but in God’s way thorns are the goad to spiritual maturity, and when we pray about them and embrace them, the very things that diminish us may be what God is using to form us. Paul says: “I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

During the Civil War, a hastily written prayer was found in the pocket of a fatally wounded soldier. “I received nothing that I asked for, but all I had hoped. My prayers were answered.” In God’s way, in God’s time, our prayers will be answered too. (1)

1) Quoted in Joanna Adams, “Paul Almighty,” *Christian Century*, June 28, 2003, p.18.