

Pentecost 6  
2 Samuel 5"1-5, 9-10  
2 Corinthians 12:2-10  
Mark 6:1-13

7/4/2021

### Sermon by Lex Breckinridge

The Apostle Paul is a complex character. Always brilliant, often opaque. Full of himself, yet filled with great humility. Filled with passion and righteous anger, yet tender and solicitous of the littlest ones. He crisscrossed the Mediterranean world constantly for almost 30 years when those journeys were so dangerous and when he was under constant threat of arrest and persecution, with single-minded zeal to call together and to serve communities that gathered in the name of Christ.

Because Paul saw that the Christ-event was the beginning of a new world, a world groaning in labor, as he says in his letter to the Romans, as it gives birth to a New Creation. That this news was life-giving and life-changing, Paul never doubted. He had a profound mystical vision of this new world, a world that was, particularly given the time and place of his context, radically inclusive. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, male or female, slave or free, but all are one in Christ Jesus," he says. All the hierarchies of the patriarchies, all the distinctions of race and class and gender and wealth and status, all that separates and polarizes and divides, all of these human-made distinctions, disappear as all Creation becomes one in Christ, this new archetypal human.

This compelling vision fired and inspired by the Holy Spirit, is also the product of an extraordinary human mind. And it's the human side of Paul I want to reflect on with you for a moment this morning. Because in Paul's humanity we may get a glimpse into our own.

Take, for example, what we read a few moments ago. It's part of what scholars call the "fool's speech." Paul evidently has some opponents, some skeptics, some rivals, in the Corinthian community, and he's writing to the community now to establish his credibility, his authority, in the wake of his challenge. And to do that he opens up his authentic self to them. Yes, he's experienced some ecstatic mystical highs – he's clearly talking about himself even though he's speaking in the third person – but to make sure he doesn't get too full of himself – to prevent him from boasting too much – and if you read Paul's letters closely, you'll see he does an awful lot of boasting – it seems he's been given a thorn in the flesh to keep him from being too elated, he says. To keep him from being too full of himself. *What* the thorn is has been the subject of speculation for 200 years. Maybe it's his opponents. Maybe it's a physical or emotional ailment like epilepsy or bad eyesight or headaches or depression. In our highly sexualized age, there has even been speculation that it was some kind of impulsive sexual urges. The *what* of it, though, doesn't seem to concern Paul. It is what it is, as they say, and it's the Divine response to this thorn that's important to Paul. Instead of magically removing whatever the thorn was, God has what might seem to us like a peculiar response:

"My grace is sufficient for you because power is made in perfect weakness." That right there, my dear friends, is the great paradox at the heart of all the great spiritual paths. Great power is *only I* - and I mean *only* – formed in great weakness. Which is to say, it is only in complete humility, it is only in complete surrender, it is only in recognizing our complete and utter dependence on God - meaning on

that Power, that Force, that is larger than ourselves, that is larger than our own small, selfish concerns, that we will experience grace. Grace that is unearned, uninherited, undeserved. Which is what makes it grace.

You've heard me say this about 100 times. All the great spiritual teachers tell us that real transformation, real spiritual growth, real spiritual enlightenment, drawing closer to union with God – will only happen through great love or great suffering. Which is to say, through vulnerability. Through openness. Through acknowledging what we don't know and can't know. Through acknowledging 1) that we aren't perfect and 2) that we can't be our own savior.

So let me ask you a question. What's the thorn in your flesh? You've got one, that's for sure, and if you're like me, you've got *more* than one. I asked myself that question as I sat down to write this sermon and the first word that immediately popped into my head was: "Perfectionism." That's sure a thorn in my flesh. The need to be perfect. The need to do everything right. The need to be flawless. Now, intellectually, I've recognized for years that perfectionism is in fact a grave sin. Why? Because it causes me to live with the illusion that I can be my own savior. The illusion that it's all up to me. And of course that's a completely frustrating illusion because we are striving for something that will never happen this side of the grave. And it separates me from God which is the very definition of sin. But perfectionists like me nevertheless work might hard – usually to the point of exhaustion – to try to cover up our flaws and weaknesses, to cover up our need for recognition, for praise, for affirmation, for affection, for esteem.

Fr. Thomas Keating years ago observed that there are 3 primary emotional programs for happiness and the pursuit of these emotional programs robs us of the experience of our True Self. The experience of our God-given self. These programs are the need of power and control, the need for safety and security, the need for affection and esteem. You see how perfectionism fits so perfectly, really, into all 3 of those programs, and for sure into the last one? The need for affection and esteem. You know, "If only I can do this or that, *then* you'll love me."

Yes, it's a real weakness. And for me though, the great paradox is that when I recognize and acknowledge this weakness, not try to hide it or cover it up, but when I'm honest about it, it's in those moments that I am my own Truest Self. I can relax into God's grace. Being OK with my imperfections allows me to experience the fullness of God's love for me, a broken, flawed sinner.

What's your thorn in the flesh? Is it something physical? Is it emotional? Is it spiritual? Whatever it is, you better name it. You better recognize it and be honest about it. If you can begin to do that, then you can begin to allow God to *use* that thorn to draw you deeper and deeper into the realm of grace.

This, after all, is the Way of the Cross. In Jesus' weakness, in Jesus' vulnerability, in his complete *trustiness*, he found God's grace to be sufficient. It seems that God has written into the fabric of the Universe the Law that abundant grace goes hand in hand with complete surrender.

So as you reflect, this afternoon and tomorrow and the day after, on your own thorn, you'll have a choice. You can fight it, you can deny it, you can try to push it away, you can shake your fist at God and say, "Why me?" Or you can take Paul's path and see your thorn as a gift from God. In humility and vulnerability you can allow God to walk alongside you and draw you even closer.

My dear sisters and brothers, great power – your power – will only be found in perfect weakness. If you can embrace that deep truth, you can begin to glimpse the Eternal.