

14 Sunday B

July 8, 2018

St. Patrick's

Theme: No "bypassing" our weakness; therein, Christ's power can work

We heard strange words from St. Paul this Sunday; however, he speaks to the heart of our spirituality as Jesus' disciples.

"I was given a thorn in the flesh," St. Paul admits, "an angel of Satan, to beat me, to keep me from being too elated."

Three times the Apostle Paul pleaded with God to take this away. God didn't. And then the Lord told Paul, **"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."** From that, St. Paul learned something about spirituality: **"I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me...for when I am weak, then I am strong."**

What's St. Paul talking about?

In our culture, we thrive on our strong points. We advertise our assets. Oh, your resume—it lists all your good qualities and achievements which make you stand out, and become "marketable."

But the Lord told Paul, **"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."**

Last week a family contacted me to visit their mother—now 90-years-old, in hospice care, and close to death. I came to know her more than thirty-five years ago in the first parish where I was a pastor, St. John's Church on Lamar Avenue.

I visited her, praying with her and giving her Communion. And I remembered her story. When I first arrived at the parish, it took some time before she shared with me a painful chapter in her life.

She had five children, the youngest being four years old, when her husband--in his early 40's--died suddenly of a heart attack. In her late 30s, she was a widow with five children. She told me that for a year, stunned by his death, she mainly laid on the living room couch, unable to cope, depressed and grieving.

Slowly, she began to connect with others, and recover. For several years now, she told me, she especially notices when someone whom she knows has a death in the family.

Before the death of her own husband, she had never given the deaths of others much thought, except for a quick visit to the funeral home.

For someone who has a loved one die, she waited for six weeks--after all the meat trays stop coming to the house, as she put it. She called and asked to make a visit. No one is around at that time, and she simply listens...and is present with the person in grief. Her **“thorn in the flesh”** became a source of connecting with others who were likewise hurting; and Christ’s grace worked precisely out of her hurt, out of her weakness, out of that vulnerable spot which had caused her so much pain.

“I was given a thorn in the flesh,” St. Paul admits today, **“an angel of Satan, to beat me, to keep me from being too elated.”**

Bible scholars have wondered what Paul’s **“thorn in the flesh”** was, **this “angel of Satan”** which buffeted him mightily. Some commentators have guessed that it might have been an eye affliction, or chronic depression.

They’re just guesses. We don’t know it. But that’s ok. Each of us knows our *own* **“thorn in the flesh”** which torments us: that vulnerable aspect of our lives (perhaps unknown to anyone else) which we do not have power over, which is a cause of grief and suffering.

It might be, however, a channel to link up with others. I’ve talked with you before about Manna House—in midtown, it ministers to homeless people, offering them showers, fresh clothes, and good coffee. One day I was working with another volunteer who gives himself tirelessly there. I asked him what got him to work at the Manna House. He told me that years ago, he was on the streets, homeless, a crack-cocaine addict. He turned to a 12-step recovery program, and he has remained clean. Now, he connects with those homeless who come to Manna House. Through his weakness, God’s grace works as he links up with others who have the same **“thorn in the flesh.”**

In many towns of West Tennessee—Selmer and Huntington are two examples--as you approach the town there are two choices. The by-pass (it’s quicker) and the business route which is slower, more of a hassle. Most drivers choose the by-pass. In our life we try to “by-pass” our vulnerable points in life, and focus on our

strengths, our assets. St. Patrick's: We'd like to get to Easter, to the resurrection, without going through the cross. We prefer to take the by-pass and simply get to the resurrection.

Today St. Paul teaches us: **“The Lord said to me, ‘My grace is enough for you, for in weakness power reaches perfection. And so, I willingly boast of my weaknesses instead, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.’”**

Paul learned not to “by-pass” his weakness. Therein, God's grace works marvels. Take the messy route through weakness. It's the only way to get to the resurrection.