

Epworth Chapel on the Green
July 8, 2012
Pentecost 6
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Ezekiel 2:1-7
Psalm 123
2 Corinthians 12:1-10
Mark 6:1-6

In our epistle lesson this morning, the Apostle Paul is responding to critics from the church at Corinth who are challenging his identity as an apostle, and undermining and impugning his credibility as a person.

These self-proclaimed “apostles” had horned their way into the church at Corinth claiming that they had "special" spiritual gifts that made them better than others. They were slick and effective communicators, and they were claiming that they had received special "private" revelations from God. Because of this, they were demanding that the church pay them for their special status.

These guys were attacking Paul, who was not an effective public speaker, arguing that he was merely a "wannabe" apostle. He is weak, they say, and his spiritual gifts are ordinary and mundane. He is not a true apostle.

These men are arrogant blowhards. Their only real skill is self-aggrandizement. And Paul holds them accountable for their prideful spirits and smug self-righteousness.

But in doing so, he mentions in his own life the presence of a “thorn,” a besetting problem which was a source of great stress in his life.

Biblical students and scholars have speculated for centuries about the nature of Paul’s thorn. Some say it was epilepsy. Others speculate that it was chronic malaria. Still others believe Paul suffered from migraine headaches. Another theory says that Paul struggled with a speech impediment. And because Paul dictated his letters to an amanuensis or secretary, there is a widely held theory that Paul’s thorn was a vision problem. Perhaps he suffered from macular degeneration or some other vision problem.

What was this “thorn” that Paul mentions? Who knows. It could have been his mother-in-law, for all we know. (Don’t send cards and letters: I love my mother-in-law!) But whatever it was -- whether a physical problem, a spiritual problem, or some other obstacle -- Paul says that this thing came into his life to combat *pride*, *self-sufficiency*, and *self-reliance* -- things that will short-circuit any serious attempt at being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

And the Apostle Paul is not the only one to know the experience of the thorn in life. We know the experience as well, don't we?

Sometimes our thorns are physical problems, problems that come from bodies that grow old, wear out, and feel the effects of sin. At other times our

thorns may be spiritual obstacles or challenges, perhaps a lesson or truth we need to learn and relearn because we struggle to get it right the first time.

And sometimes our thorns may be other people. (I must admonish you again, do not send cards and letters -- I love my mother-in-law!)

Even if Paul's thorn was a physical problem, there is no question that his opponents in the church at Corinth are also causing him major pain and suffering. His experience with them enables us to understand more fully the origin of the phrase, "a thorn in my side."

Paul's response, quite naturally, is to see his thorn in the flesh as an impediment, as an obstacle that needs removed or overcome. So he prays to God (not once but three times) and asks God to remove the problem.

But apparently God doesn't see Paul's thorn as a problem. *God does not seem to view the thorn as an impediment which needs to be removed, but as an opportunity to be embraced.* This is such a difficult truth, and one that is hard to grasp. But it appears as though from God's perspective Paul's thorn in the flesh is actually a *means of grace*, a situation fraught with potential for God to act.

And so God's answer to Paul's prayer involves some of the most comforting, and at the same time some of the most challenging, words ever spoken: "My grace is sufficient for you." My gracious favor is all you need. My power works best in your life when you are weak.

Oh, my brothers and sisters, it is so easy to speak those words, to intellectualize them, to spiritualize them. But it is another thing altogether to *internalize* them, to believe them in the core of our being, and to live them.

What, then, are we to do with the thorns in our lives?

Sometimes, if you're like me, it is easy to view your thorn as a problem, as an impediment or barrier to your spiritual growth and your walk with God. In such cases the natural response is to pray, to ask God to fix the problem by removing the impediment. To see the thorn as a *liability*.

The difficulty with this is that our thorn can begin to take over our life, to control us, and to eventually define us. This is especially true the longer it persists or remains with us.

Another difficulty with this is that we tend to see the thorn as the problem, when in reality *we* are the problem, and the thorn is merely a symptom of a larger underlying issue that God wants to work on in our lives. Quite often with us, the underlying issue is our pride (as it was with the Apostle Paul). Thorns become messengers, trying to point to something deeper within us. But when we see the thorn as the *problem*, our whole focus can be given over to it, and not what God may be wanting to do in our lives.

Is there is another way to respond to the thorns in our lives? Perhaps there is. What if we could view our thorns as *opportunities* instead of *liabilities*?

What if we saw our thorns as God's way of trying to get our attention, of seeking our permission to give us grace in an area of our lives where we need his help?

What if we used our thorns to deepen our relationship with God instead of just treating God as a problem-solver?

What if, rather than allowing our thorns to define and control us, we asked God to use our thorns as channels of grace and transformation?

As we come to the Table of the Lord this morning, I remind you that the gifts of bread and wine are God's promise to you that his grace is sufficient for your every need -- even when the channel of that grace is a thorn.

So open your hands and your hearts. Bring yourself -- thorns and all -- to his table. Receive the grace he offers you. For it is always sufficient.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.