

**First Presbyterian Church  
Southampton, New York  
“Goodness Gracious!”**

**2 Corinthians 12:2 – 10  
Mark 6:1 – 13**

**July 5, 2015**

You know, I think it’s safe to say that, of all the great movers and shakers in the history of the Christian faith... Paul the Apostle would have to pretty much be right at the top of the list. I mean, just consider the credentials that this guy brought to the table, as he took his place within the leadership ranks of the post-resurrection mission of Jesus:

He was Roman a citizen, which, at first glance, may not seem like much of an attribute; but at that time, in that part of the world, it was one of the most important benefits a person could have. Being a Roman citizen meant that Paul could travel freely and in relative safety, under the *Pax Romana*, anywhere within the vast empire of Rome; a crucial advantage which Paul would put to good use during his church-planting missionary trips throughout Asia Minor. And it also meant that the Roman authorities would have to treat Paul with respect and with all due and fair legal process; which would become critically important during Paul’s later ministry.

Paul was also a trained theologian in the Jewish faith; who learned the intricacies of Judaism “at the feet” of the great Jerusalem rabbi, Gamaliel; which made it possible for Paul to speak the theological language of his Jewish opponents, as he proclaimed to them the gospel message. Paul knew better than anyone how the mission of Jesus fit into the larger picture of God’s relationship with Israel... and he used that knowledge to great effect in his debates and discussions with various Jewish authorities.

At the same time, Paul was also a trained philosopher... who could stand toe-to-toe with the best of the Stoics, and the Cynics, and the Epicureans, and all the other great thinkers of the Greeks. So, Paul was not only able to debate the merits of Jesus in the synagogues of Galilee and Judea; he was also able to argue for the truth of the gospel in the Areopagus in Athens. All of which means that there was virtually nowhere in the entire, immense, Greco-Roman world where Paul *wouldn’t* be able to speak to people effectively about Jesus Christ.

Next, I think we can also say that Paul the Apostle was one tough cookie! He might not have been the most imposing guy to look at; what little information about his physical appearance that we can glean from the New Testament suggests that Paul was certainly no James Bond... he was probably short, a little on the dumpy side, and perhaps not terribly athletic. No modern movie director would ever cast him in the role of The Terminator!

Nevertheless, Paul was able to endure shipwrecks, snake bites, whippings, stonings, being adrift on the open sea for a day and a night, and the non-stop verbal abuse of his opponents. More than once Paul’s enemies put a contract out on his life. He quite possibly endured more mental, physical, and spiritual abuse than any five of us put together. Yet, through it all, Paul remained strong, courageous, and undaunted in the tireless pursuit of his mission. He simply wouldn’t allow anything, or anyone, to stand in the way of his call to preach the gospel. So, yes, Paul the Apostle was absolutely as tough as they come.

Of course, Paul was also responsible for writing thirteen books of the New Testament; although a few of them, like First and Second Timothy, may possibly have been written in his name by one of his disciples. But, be that as it may, Paul is certainly behind the lion's share of what we would call "Christology," or "theology concerning Christ," within the New Testament record. We probably don't stop and think about it too often, but so much of what we think, and feel, and do, and take for granted in our day-to-day Christian walk comes directly from the teaching of the letters of Paul. The gospels are certainly the foundational texts in our understanding of Jesus; but the writings of Paul are obviously crucial, too... for a healthy life of faith.

And what about power? I mean, spiritual power? I mean the power of Almighty God, to work signs, and wonders, and miracles? Paul had that... and he had it **big!** During the course of his ministry, Paul healed the sick, just like Jesus; exorcised demons from those who were possessed, again just like Jesus; demonstrated power over the forces of nature; and brought people back from the dead. This in addition to speaking in tongues, and having the gift of prophecy. Paul wasn't the only miracle-worker in the early days of the Christian church; but you can be sure that nobody else was doing the job as well as he was... or with more authority.

And then, in our lesson today from Second Corinthians, Paul describes a visionary experience from fourteen years earlier, in which he was allowed to witness heavenly realities which no human being had ever been allowed see. Paul says that he "*heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.*" Apparently, Paul's spiritual stature was so great, that the Lord gave him the rarest of sneak previews of what God's heavenly realm is like. No one before had ever been allowed to see and hear what Paul had seen and heard; and, as far as we know, nobody has been given that privilege ever since. And Paul makes it clear that it was an incredible, indescribable, experience.

Now, much more could be said about the strength of Paul's credentials as a leader in the earliest Christian church; but you get the idea. Paul the Apostle was as great an example of faithful, powerful discipleship... as you are ever going to find. So, probably the **last** thing that we'd expect to hear about him... is what he tells us in the second part of our passage from Second Corinthians. Because in that text, Paul says that God's power is perfected... it's manifested and made most evident; not in Paul's great strength and accomplishment, but in his... **weakness!**

Or, to put it another way, Paul is saying that he is most able to see, and experience, and appreciate the greatness of God's love and grace... in his moments of **weakness**, not in his times of strength! And why is that? It's because when Paul is weak... he's not able to rely on his own talents and ability. When he's weak... he must rely on God; he must rely on God's grace. And, it's in seeing how dependent he is on that which only God can give him... that he realizes just how much God has done for Him; and how much God has loved him.

Paul expands on this idea, after alluding to the wonderful spiritual experiences which the Lord had allowed him to see... by telling us about a mysterious "*thorn in my flesh,*" which, Paul says, was given to him "*to keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations.*" Paul describes this thorn as "*a messenger of Satan, to torment me.*" But beyond that rather vague and ominous depiction, we really aren't sure precisely what this thorn, or this torment, really was.

New Testament scholars have debated for centuries as to just what Paul's "thorn in the flesh" might have been. Poor vision, stomach ailments, anxiety attacks, and severe depression have all been suggested as possible thorns to keep Paul in his place. But at the end of the day, no one

really knows for sure. But, whatever it was, it's clear that Paul sure didn't like it! In fact, as he tells us, *"three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me."* But in every case, Paul's request was denied, as the Lord told him: *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*

In other words, whatever the nature of Paul's "thorn in the flesh," it's purpose was to help him remember that it was God's grace, and not Paul's own considerable gifts and strength, which was the ultimate source of Paul's hope for life in God's kingdom. The greatness of God would be exhibited not just in Paul's own greatness... but also in Paul's weakness, because that weakness would be a constant reminder of Paul's never-ending need for that which only God could give him.

Paul might be the greatest Christian that ever lived; he might be the world champion of sainted spiritual leaders; but without God's grace in his life, and in his heart, he was zip... zilch... nothing. It was as if the Lord was saying, via this troubling and irritating thorn, *"Don't forget that you need me, Paul... no matter what great things you accomplish with your life. Don't forget, that, really, it's all about me... and not about you!"*

And so Paul is able to end our text by reminding his friends in Corinth that, *"For Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."* And, again, this doesn't mean that Paul was some kind of masochist; it just means that, in his weakness he remembers and is grateful for, God's grace, and love, and strength.

Which brings us back to this morning, and our own daily life of Christian faith and discipleship. Probably none of us has managed to live out the Christian life with the kind of zeal and power with which Paul lived his Christian life. But, at the end of the day, I don't think that our experience is really all that much different from Paul's experience. Not that you and I have been given visionary visits to the third heaven... to see the inner workings of God's kingdom, and other spiritual phenomena that nobody else has seen before! But just that, like Paul, we know what it's like to make some progress in our Christian walk... and to be given various thorns in the flesh to keep us from becoming too spiritually full of ourselves.

I mean, all of us have some reminder or other in our life, that we're still very far from perfect; that, even though we may be trying our best to live lives of faith, we still have a long way to go, to get to where God wants us to be; to caution us against being "holier than thou," because our own brand of holiness is often full of... holes. We all know what that's like. And, I don't know about you, but *my* thorns bug the heck out of me! I like to think that I'm making decent progress as a Christian, as a disciple; and it pains me royally to be reminded by the Lord that I'm probably not as saintly as I sometimes think I am!

Yet, those same thorns... which can cause us so much angst and irritation; can also be a source of great spiritual growth and understanding. If we, like Paul before us, will use them to remind ourselves that, when all is said and done, we take our stand in life *not* on the merits of our own good works; but 100% on the merits of God's good grace. It's the grace of our Heavenly Father that's sufficient for us... just as it was sufficient for Paul; and we are to seek our hope, our good, our peace, and the ultimate meaning of our life in that grace... not in our own good works, in our own sense of personal importance.

Which doesn't mean that we aren't supposed to do our best, every day of our life, to be the best Christian disciples that we can possibly be! You bet we're supposed to be doing that! But at

the end of the day, that's not what saves us; that's not what gives our lives purpose and understanding; that's not gives us hope to handle any and all thorns which life might throw our way. Only God can give us those great and irreplaceable gifts. And the good news is, as Paul has said, that we receive just that gift... through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ!

So, as we make our way through the rest of this summer, let's do our best to build up impressive resumes of good works and faithful Christian living! Let's try hard to shine the light of Christ to our summer community, which in so many ways really needs to see the truth of the gospel. Let's make a point of being agents of our Lord's healing, and reconciliation, and peace. And most of all, let's never forget that, through it all, *the grace of Jesus is sufficient for us!* And so shall it always be! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!