

Ezekiel 2:1-5; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Grace to you and peace from God who is who was and who is to come. Amen

So I was watching television last night (there's a shock for you) watching the Spike channel because they do the CSI reruns from 7-9 PM. There was a CSI show that I actually hadn't seen, or at least don't remember seeing. And in the course of the show the main character, Gil Grissom, was trying to prove the innocence of a person who has been accused of a horrendous crime. The reason Gil knows the guy is innocent is, regardless of what the evidence says, this young man's priest has come to Gil and has encouraged him and told him about what a good young man this fellow is, and, as much as the priest is allowed, what a not so good guy the older brother is. Now unfortunately, Gil Grissom is not able to prove beyond a reasonable doubt the innocence of this young man and so the show closes with Gil Grissom talking to the priest. Now the priest has earlier recognized that Gil is a lapsed practicing Roman Catholic and he shares with Gil, he says, 'you know, the thing with Roman Catholics, especially lapsed Roman Catholics' (and I think we could probably just say the thing most Christians or lapsed Christians), 'is that most people, if a light bulb blows, you go you get a new light bulb and you replace it. But those folks who have lapsed in their practice, when the light bulb blows they stand in the darkness and say why is this happening to me?'

Now in our story tonight from 2 Corinthians, Paul is not a lapsed Roman Catholic, he is not even a lapsed Jew, nor is Paul asking why is this happening to me. Because Paul is looking at this opportunity of his own blown light bulb, or as he calls it, this "thorn" in his side, a thorn in his flesh, as a chance to grow. Now he has been using his own life as an example to the congregation in Corinth. If you remember from a couple of weeks ago, back in chapter 6 he reminisces about the many and various things he has endured. He says in chapter 6:

⁵ We have been beaten, been put in prison, faced angry mobs, worked in exhausting, endured sleepless nights, and gone without food. ⁶ We prove ourselves by our purity, our understanding, our patience, our kindness, by the Holy Spirit within us, and by our sincere love.

But he's got something else going on as well. Something far more personal that he calls this "thorn in his flesh." Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, Paul wrote:

a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. ⁸Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, ⁹but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

Paul I think has a little bit of that streak that Ezekiel was talking about, that impudent and stubbornness, in that three times he went back to the Lord to ask for this thorn to go.

Scholars have debated for centuries as to what exactly it is that Paul was enduring. Some say that it was an ongoing spiritual battle. Some say that he had some kind of a physical difficulty. There are those that even say he was referring to problems with a certain congregation, *if you know what I mean, wink, wink, nudge, nudge*. In other words, that maybe he is making a reference to the church there in Corinth that he wishes they would just straighten up.

We have no biblical record of what Paul's problem was. We have no biblical record of Paul's physical attributes or for any of the disciples actually. Christian tradition tell us that Paul was short in stature, balding on top, probably had bad or failing eyesight. Now it is this last point, though, that is corroborated by the fact that in several of his letters he signs off by saying something along the lines of, 'look you can tell that I am writing to you now, because look at how big the handwriting is.' Normally he would dictate a letter, but on the very personal letters he would write in his own hand. On those manuscripts, well we

don't have the original manuscripts, we only have the copies, the words apparently were in large letters. Now the ironic part of that is, if you remember Paul's conversion story (or as we should say, Saul) back in Acts chapter 9, as Saul is on his way to Damascus, that he has this encounter with Christ and then this bright light shines down and blinds him and they lead him on to Damascus where he sits in darkness for three days (Oh gee, there's a number that is kind of biblical). He sits in darkness for three days until this other guy Ananias comes because God told him to go seek out this Saul person, and Saul is healed. And there are those who say that it was in Saul's calling that he began to suffer that eyesight.

So he refers to this thorn in his flesh. Another interesting (at least to me) little side note is that back in the first century sharpened wooden stakes were often placed into a pit that with hopes that enemy soldiers would walk along and fall in and be impaled. These stakes were also used as a method of torture. We could almost say they were the roadside bombs of the first century. And the word that describes these spikes, the Greek word *skolops* – is the same word that Paul talks about this thorn in his flesh.

Now there are some who say that Paul is just being tested by God, but I don't agree with that. Because if God really is God: if God is omniscient and knows everything; if God is really God and is not constrained by time; then God doesn't need to test us because God knows whether or not we're going to fail or whether we're going to do right. To give another example, the whole story of Abraham and Isaac going up the mountain: I don't think God was testing Abraham to see if Abraham really loved God, or God put Abraham through that to say to Abraham, look at how much you love me. You are willing to give you son to me. God wasn't testing Abraham to see if Abraham loved him. God was trying to help Abraham to know how much Abraham ALREADY loved God. God's not trying to test Paul, I don't think, by putting this thorn into his side; God's giving him, or allowing, this difficulty to happen so that he can grow from it.

Okay, here is a more modern example of what I mean. A young guy, Hilbert Caesar, was, according to a *Washington Post* article in November of last year, an Army staff sergeant in charge of a long-range 155mm howitzer – which is a self-propelled gun that kind of resembles a tank. He was on patrol in Iraq when a roadside bomb exploded. When the smoke cleared, Caesar looked down and saw that most of his right leg was no longer in existence in this world. And his thought was "this is it, my life is over." However, they were able to very quickly transport him back to the Walter Reed Hospital, here in the U.S. where the missing limb was eventually replaced with an artificial leg of steel and plastic. But still he felt despair about his future. He was in pain, and worried that he never again would be able to run or even be attractive to women. He received word that eight of the men from his platoon had later been killed by a car bomb in Baghdad. That news was devastating to him. But little by little as he met other injured soldiers and heard them talk of their recoveries, his focus began to shift. He began to look for the best and realized that he was fortunate just to make it back from the battle. As he said, "I'm thankful for just being here." He now competes in marathons in racing wheelchairs, he's found a job with the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs. He sees the loss of his leg as a minor setback, and believes that he has come out of the war with more wisdom, compassion and appreciation for life. He would say that he has experienced "post-traumatic growth." There are a number of psychiatrists and psychologists are beginning to see that not all soldiers who return from war do so with a shattered spirit. There are a number who are emerging with the experience of feeling enhanced. That's not to say that war is a wonderful thing, but it can lead to personal growth.

Trauma can move us from isolation to community and then trauma can shift us from self-reliance to reliance on God. Paul had a trauma in his life, and it moved him toward God. In the fictional CSI program, Gil Grissom apparently had a trauma in his life that moved him away from God. Trauma in our life, thorns in our life, can be devastating, or we can grow from them. Paul learned from his post-traumatic growth: he learned that God's grace is sufficient. It is something that I think all of us can learn as well. That we can discover that the power of God's grace is here in our community and also in our

increasing reliance upon God. Reliance on God moves us from weakness to strength, from agony to ecstasy. It moves us from the cross to resurrection. Paul wrote to the Corinthians "I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ for whenever I am weak, then I am strong." Let us together be weak so that God indeed can make us strong. Amen.

Young Folks Talk

How are you guys tonight? Now this is probably not going to be anything that you guys ever do. Now I know a couple of brothers, let's just say that for pretend sake that one is 10 and one is 12, not that I'm naming any names. But these two brothers you know, they were apart all week long and they saw each other today for pretty much the first time, and do you know what they started to do? They started to pick on each other. I know that is really hard to believe. I know that probably none of you guys who have brothers or sisters would never do that to your brothers or sisters, you see Dakota's the lucky one he doesn't have to put up with brothers or sisters. I have a brother and sister but they don't live with me, Dakota said. Ah well, that is what I meant, but you don't have to put up with them. You have to put up with some strange cousins maybe, but you don't have to put up with anybody in the house but your dad and mom.

You guys never would do anything like that would you? Would you Benjamin? Oh you would, no you wouldn't would you, you wouldn't pick on Mariam? You would? Would you ever pick on Elizabeth? No, well good deal, but you would pick on Mariam. I know Patrick you would never pick on your sister, no, yea that's what I thought. Caroline you wouldn't pick on Alex, no, you would? Oh man. Dakota, would you ever pick on Danny? No, see you're a nice big sister. Is that right Danny, does she ever pick on you? Sometimes... maybe just a little bit. Well, okay, on those very rare occasions when you're brother or sister picks on you what do you guys do? You pick on them back, oh Mariam oh, I am crushed to think that you would do that to decent Benjamin here. That is what we do, when somebody picks on us we kind of pick back. Somebody comes up and starts to poke you you're going to turn around and poke them back. Oh, you wouldn't poke. Well that's good Danny, I am glad. There are nicer ways to deal with our brothers or sisters.

But you know in the second lesson that Mariam read for us tonight, Paul is talking about this kind of weird thing, he says he has a thorn in his flesh. Do you know what that means when he is talking about a thorn in his flesh? Do you think he is walking around with a big old rose thorn stuck in his leg somewhere? What Paul means is that he has something that is bugging him. Now we don't know for sure what it was. We don't know if it was maybe somebody in one of the churches or if it was maybe something that was wrong with him.

Maybe it was one of the other Apostles bugging him. We don't know. But he was talking about a thorn in his flesh. What he said I prayed to God for this difficulty to go away and it didn't go away in the way that I wanted it to. But do you know what he said? He said I learned from it, from that difficulty not going away I learned how to deal with it. Now as much as we might maybe wish that our brother or sister might go away, I think at least in the pretend case that I was talking about earlier, about the two brothers, I know that they would really miss each other, those two boys really would. And I'll bet as much as your brother and sister and cousins might bug you sometimes you'd really miss them if they go away.

What we need to remember, like what Paul learned, is that God is with us in all those times and is going to help us figure out a way not to get back at our brother or sister. But how to love our brother or sister or cousins despite the sometimes annoying things they do. So let's join together in a word of prayer and ask God for some help. Can we do that?

Hey, Lord, sometimes we don't want to say this, but thank you for our brothers or sisters or cousins or friends. Thank you Lord for when we get along really well and play together, but we want to thank you too, Lord that we have them even though they sometimes really bug us and annoy us. We ask Lord that in those time that they bug us or maybe we bug them, that you'd help us to remember that you are part of them and you are part of us and you want us to love each other. So help us try to figure out ways that we won't bug each other that we can love our brothers or sisters or cousins or friends the way that you love us. Thank you lord that you do love us. We pray in your name. Amen.