

THE THORN IN OUR FLESH

In this morning's reading from 2 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul used a rather curious, enigmatic term:

“. . . a thorn in my flesh.”

I think we all sort of know what Paul was getting at when he used that expression, even if he didn't say specifically what the thorn he was suffering from was. After all, in many ways life in this world is like a rose: beautiful to look at with a sweet, pleasing aroma, but also studded with thorns that can inflict pain and draw blood. And we all have our own individual thorns that torment us.

Some thorns in life are pretty minor—more of an inconvenience than anything else, but they can still torment us in their own trivial way. For example, many times when I'm driving on Route One—north or south, it doesn't matter because this happens to me no matter which direction I'm driving in—I'll be cruising along and see a green light up ahead. And as I draw closer to the traffic light I begin to say to myself, “Okay, come on now. Stay green. Don't change on me. I'm almost there. Just a few seconds longer. Stay green. Stay green. Stay green. Stay

The traffic light then turns yellow, and I'm still too far away to make it through the intersection without running a red light like a large number of other drivers on the road seem to do. So I come to an abrupt stop, peeved and frustrated, and look up at the traffic light, convinced that it's mocking me!

But that's a minor thorn in the flesh. There are much more agonizing, painful thorns people have to endure. I've ministered to others who had to endure the thorn of battling cancer for years. They went through painful surgeries and chemotherapy and radiation treatments that made them feel nauseous and lose their hair.

When I was working as a Chaplain Intern I ministered to a woman whose thorn was giving birth to a baby who died only few minutes after being born.

I've ministered to individuals who had been verbally abused and mistreated, and the thorn in their flesh was the persistent little voice in their head telling them that their abuser was right and they really were worthless,

stupid and unlovable.

There are a whole host of “thorns in the flesh” that can torment us and cause us to throw up our hands in surrender and plead with God to take it away. Sometimes (praise God), the thorn we suffer is eventually removed and we find relief and release from our distress. But at other times (why, God?), when no matter how faithfully and persistently we pray and implore and demand, the thorn remains deeply and firmly stuck in us and, for whatever reason, God allows our suffering to continue.

“Three times,” the Apostle Paul said, “three times I pleaded with the Lord to take [my thorn] away from me.” But the Lord had other plans. It seems God saw the thorn in Paul’s flesh as an instrument of divine grace. Maybe Paul’s ego needed deflating. Maybe Paul had forgotten that the work he was doing and the accomplishments he was achieving on behalf of Christ weren’t of his own doing, but were God’s doing and God’s alone. Maybe Paul needed a sharp reminder (pun intended) that he was completely dependent on God’s grace to do the work he was doing for Christ.

Sometimes we need a thorn in our flesh to bring us back to reality and remind us that we’re mortals who are living on borrowed time from the moment we’re born into this world; that our lives are meaningless without God’s grace; and the things we try to accomplish in life and we think are so important actually have little or no value if they’re done outside the boundaries of God’s love.

One of the most powerful declarations in this reading from 2 Corinthians, for me, are the words God spoke to Paul after Paul pleaded to have the thorn in his flesh taken away. “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” I take that to mean some of the most effective work God accomplishes and most powerful ministry done on Christ’s behalf can happen when we’re at our weakest and most vulnerable.

Why? Because that’s when we’re most likely to confess our helplessness and dependence, and allow Christ’s power to rest on us. That’s when we get out of the way at last and say, “Okay, God, I give up. Here, you take charge now.” It’s amazing, even miraculous, the things God can do when the thorns in our flesh we suffer from remind us, often very painfully, that God’s grace is sufficient, and we allow Christ’s power to rest on us and work through us.

Author and preacher Tony Campolo was once asked to be a counselor in a junior high camp. In his words: “Everybody ought to be a counselor in a junior high camp—just once. A junior high kid’s concept of a good time is picking on

people. And in this particular place, at this particular camp, there was a boy who suffered from cerebral palsy. His name was Billy. And they picked on him. Oh, did they pick on him. As he walked across the camp with his uncoordinated body they would line up and imitate his grotesque movements. I watched him one day as he was asking for directions. “Which ... way ... is ... the ... craft ... shop?” he stammered, his mouth contorting. And the boys mimicked him in that same awful stammer, “It’s ... over ... there ... Billy.” And then they laughed at him. I was irate.

But my furor reached its highest pitch when on Thursday morning it was Billy’s turn to lead devotions. I wondered what would happen, because [the other boys] had appointed Billy to be the speaker. I knew that they just wanted to get him up there to make fun of him. As Billy dragged his way to the front, you could hear the giggles rolling over the crowd. It took young Billy almost five minutes to say seven words.

“Jesus ... loves ... me ... and ... I ... love ... Jesus.”

When he finished, there was dead silence. I looked over my shoulder and saw junior high boys bawling all over the place. A revival broke out in that camp after Billy’s short testimony. And as I travel all over the world, I run into missionaries and preachers who say, “Remember me? I was converted that day at that junior high camp.”

Campolo wrote, “We counselors had tried everything to get those kids interested in Jesus. We even brought in professional baseball players whose batting averages had gone up since they had started praying. “But God chose not to use the superstars. Instead, God chose a kid with cerebral palsy to break the spirits of the conceited. He’s that kind of God.”

Billy’s “thorn in the flesh” was a terrible disease that caused him to be physically challenged. He suffered terrible torment from it. He struggled to walk. He struggled to talk. He struggled for acceptance by those who, at least outwardly, seemed to have no thorn in the flesh tormenting them.

God only knows how many times Billy must have prayed to God about the thorn in his flesh. I’m sure he had questions. “Why me, God? Why do I have to suffer with cerebral palsy?” Billy also probably had his fair share of arguments and expressions of anger toward God for the unfair hand life had dealt him. “It’s not fair, God! Why are you punishing me? I didn’t do anything to deserve this!”

I wouldn’t be surprised if Billy prayed to the Lord for the thorn in his flesh to be taken away. Maybe his prayer went something like, “Lord Jesus, you healed lepers and made the blind see and the lame walk. You even raised Lazarus from the dead. So help me! I love you, and I know you love me and could heal me of my cerebral palsy if you wanted to. So please, won’t you do

that?”

Maybe Billy was too young to understand the words God spoke to the Apostle Paul. “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” But God sure made Billy a living, breathing example of what God meant by those words. Christ’s power rested on him, and because of it, lives were dramatically transformed. And faith was ignited in the cold, hardened hearts of a bunch of junior high boys who had no idea what faith was about or what living a Christ-centered life meant.

As I said earlier, my friends, we all have our thorns in the flesh to endure. Some thorns are quite bearable, and others are close to intolerable. But the Apostle Paul said God can use our thorns to remind us that even in weaknesses, in insults, in sickness, in hardships, in persecutions, and in difficulties, when we are weak, then we are strong, if we allow Christ’s power to rest on us. Thanks be to God. Amen.