



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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My Grace is Sufficient
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Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me (2 Corinthians 12:8-9).

Paul says, "I know someone who fourteen years ago was caught up to heaven." Most interpreters think he's talking about himself, as when we say, "I have this friend..." by way of bringing up a subject we're too embarrassed to talk about directly.

Let's say it was Paul who had that experience, and the vision was glorious. He says it was Paradise. Maybe it was like those near-death experiences where people meet loved ones who have gone before, and the colors are brilliant, and the music is unforgettable, and love fills the air, almost as if love was the air, and the whole environment is joy and peace and wonder. Let's say it was something like that. And the memory is so sweet that Paul might be tempted to dwell on it and forget about this world with all its challenges and responsibilities. Some people's idea of Christianity is like that. They become so otherworldly that they're no earthly good, as someone has said.

But then there is this "thorn" in Paul's side, and it keeps him from being too elated about his vision of heaven. We don't know what it is. He doesn't tell us, and that's just as well, because the truth is, most of us have some thorn of our own that plagues us, and we know what that's like.

Most of us carry around some sort of thorn, some kind of chronic struggle or challenge. Maybe we have problems with self-esteem, and we're afraid we're not good enough, or smart enough, or pretty enough. Maybe we feel alone and

wish the long loneliness would end, but the right person never comes along. Maybe we're afraid there won't be enough money to go around. Or else we have all sorts of temptations, addictions we keep coming back to, and we can't seem to let go of them. Maybe we have some illness or a pain that never goes away, and it wears us down over time. Maybe we struggle with anxiety, or have some deep longing that never seems to be satisfied.

Most of us have a thorn of some sort that we carry around and can't get rid of. And maybe we've prayed that God would take the thorn away. That's what Paul did. He says he pleaded with God three times to remove his thorn, but God never did. That doesn't necessarily mean God put it there in the first place, only that God did not take it away.

But God does something else for Paul instead. God gives him an extra measure of grace. The answer to Paul's prayers is not, "I'll pull out your thorn," but rather, "My grace is sufficient for you." My grace will take care of you, because what you need even more than relief from your struggle is reassurance that I am with you. I am your God, and my power to sustain you shines brightest when you know you need it the most.

So Paul, who was tempted to boast about what great things he had seen, learns to boast instead about something else. Instead of focusing on himself and his own experiences he learns to focus more and more on the grace of God. His thorn forces him to do that day by day, until he comes to feel the power of Christ that strengthens him, a power infinitely greater and far more reliable than his own. That power enables him to bear all sorts of challenges and struggles until the time when he will be taken up to heaven again for good.

The late Christian psychiatrist Gerald May's wonderful book *Addiction and Grace* describes how addictions work in all areas of our lives, not just in obvious things like drugs and alcohol. May describes our various addictions as something like the thorn in Paul's side: the thing itself is not good, but God can use it to reveal our weakness and create a space for grace to come in.

A thoughtful member of our congregation has been reading May's book and he commented to me the other day that, among other things, we're all addicted to ourselves: our freedom, our wealth, our security, our reputation, our recognition and acceptance by others. We're addicted to ourselves and our preoccupations, "hounded by our needs and greeds," as a Buddhist teacher says in a book I've been reading lately. Buddhists try to solve the problem through meditation to show that the self is ultimately just an illusion. Christians have a different solution. We believe the self is quite real and that it's made in fact for eternal life. But in order to have a life worth living the self needs to know that is a gift of God's grace, and a vessel to carry and reflect that grace to the glory of God. In the end, only grace can cure us of our addictions and set us free.

What's true of individuals is also true of whole societies and nations. The president gave a remarkable eulogy at the memorial service for the Rev. Clementa Pinckney a week ago in the wake of the shootings at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston. It was remarkable because it was all about grace, and grace is not a subject that elected officials typically say much about these days. The president said he did not know Reverend Pinckney well, but they had met, and "The first thing I noticed was his graciousness, his smile, his reassuring baritone, his deceptive sense of humor—all qualities that helped him wear

so effortlessly a heavy burden of expectation.”

Two things leapt out at me when I read that line in the eulogy. The first was the impression of grace that shone through the pastor. Apparently that grace caught on with the congregation, too, since so many of them have responded with truly amazing grace after the murder of their family and friends and fellow church members. The president said he'd been thinking about grace all week as a result of the grace emanating from Emanuel Church.

The other thing that leapt out at me was the comment about how grace enabled Rev. Pinckney to “wear so effortlessly a heavy burden of expectation.” I know how heavy a burden expectations can be: expectations of ourselves, expectations of others, expectations of the congregation to do the right things when it's so much easier to do something else, or to do nothing at all.

And some of us have expectations of our nation too. The racially motivated murders in Charleston are only the latest in a long series of reminders that we still have a lot of work to do in this country on race and many other matters. Some of us expect our nation to do much better, because our central documents speak of such high aspirations: that all are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, and that we are to be one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

Those are high expectations, and they can feel like a heavy burden to carry around, especially when so many people seem not to care whether everyone else is treated the way they themselves want to be treated. And yet, as the president said at the memorial service, God works in mysterious ways. God has different ideas. That young man

who committed those murders didn't know he was being used by God. "Blinded by hatred, the alleged killer could not see the grace surrounding Reverend Pinckney and that Bible study group ..." a grace that has already led to a reexamination of some attitudes and a few more steps toward reconciliation between the races—the very opposite of what the murderer intended.

On this Fourth of July weekend we're singing some patriotic songs. Of course we all love our country, and we want it to be safe and secure and strong and free. But it's important that we always keep our patriotism where it belongs—*under* God, not above God or equal to God—and subject to the continuing review of God's expectations for love and justice. We need to remember that we always stand in the need of grace, not only as individuals, but also as a nation.

That's why one of our hymns today asks for America that "God shed his grace on thee." We need God's grace because only by the grace of God does anything good ever happen. Only by grace is any wrong made right, any sin redeemed, or any addiction cured.

It's also why another of our hymns reminds us that, while we naturally love our own country most of all, "other hearts in other lands are beating with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine." Those people abroad are as precious in the sight of God as we are. God's grace is poured out on people everywhere, and all of us are to be bearers of that grace in our private lives and in our life together as a nation.

"My grace is sufficient for you," the Lord said to St. Paul. We may have to struggle with some thorns for a time.

But if our struggle shows us the limits of our own righteousness and strength, and teaches us to rely on God's righteousness and strength, then God will use even the thorns in our individual lives and life of our nation to redeem us and make us stronger and better than we could ever be on our own.

Since that is true, let our prayer be, this week and always, for ourselves and our neighbors, and for our nation and all nations, "God shed his grace on thee."



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