

## Finding Sufficiency (2 Cor. 12:7b-10)

This past Wednesday began the season of Lent—six and one half weeks in the church calendar that ends at Easter. It is based on the wilderness experience of Jesus, a time of separation and reflection prior to the beginning of his public ministry. In the ancient church it was a time of final preparation for people who were to be received into the church on Easter. For us it is a time of reflection and repentance designed to draw us nearer to Christ prior to the celebration of his resurrection. Often this time includes some expression of fasting—a deprivation of sorts that draws our attention to Christ as the source of our life. It's been customary for us, as a church, to explore a particular theme during Lent, something that binds us together in our symbolic withdrawal during this season. But, as we noted in the Ash Wednesday service, it seems like we have already been in Lent since this time last year. So rather than focus on a particular aspect of withdrawal, we will explore the theme of “Re-directing Sorrow and Disappointment.” There's been plenty of that handed out this year—how do we deal with it?

Voluntary deprivation and withdrawal is one thing. We're typically able to manage this since there are usually certain goals we set as outcomes for this time—we welcome the opportunity to focus on these, and we know that our withdrawal and deprivation is temporary. Soon enough, under those circumstances, our lives will return to normal again, and we hope to have gained some benefit we can include as we resume our normal routines.

Involuntary deprivation is altogether different—it feels less like liberation and more like prison. Right now we're in a time such as this—some more severe than others, but all of us are experiencing some sense of restriction, confinement—a forced withdrawal from the routine of our lives, the absence of social life apart from electronic means, the change in our work life, school lives for our children—our homes, rather than being a place of reprieve and refreshment, have become the center of all of our activities, and to varying degrees this has affected our relationships with those closest to us—trifles have become tempests, and we have become different people than we want to be. Some among us, who live alone, have felt isolated or abandoned—loneliness and depression have become constant companions, and we have found ourselves alone in our thoughts contemplating ideas that wouldn't have seen the light of day previously.

And what do we do when this situation looks less like a temporary inconvenience and more like a new normal? What do we do when aspects of this new normal aren't particularly welcomed or desired? How do we handle the presence of pain visited upon us that's taken up residence—whether that's physical, emotional, relational, or psychological pain that seems now to be a regular fixture rather than a temporary moment?

Christ followers are not immune from this. In fact, for us it can compound especially when we've prayed for relief and found none. Then our sense of deprivation or pain can roll into suffering, where Barbara Taylor suggests, the mind decides what this means and whether it is deserved. And when God is non-responsive, that leads us into questions about ourselves—what have we done to offend God that this is now my lot, or in the other direction—what does this say about God? Have I misunderstood who God is, or what God is like? Some among us didn't need the pandemic to draw these questions out—some of us have been living with this for some time already because of circumstances that have dealt a blow in our life or a chronic condition or a malady that deprives us in some way or in some cases it is physical pain that regularly shows up or remains as a dull presence that can't or won't go away. Where do we go with this?

As I'm sure you've realized by now, the passage Pastor Andrea read for us moments ago speaks to this situation. The Apostle Paul wrestled with some chronic malady he called a thorn in the flesh—most folks believe it was some type of physical problem. What it was doesn't matter—that he had it does, and it caused him sufficient distress that he pleaded for release from it 3 times. But release wasn't the outcome. What then?

Before we get too far along in this, let's understand that this issue in his life wasn't a matter of punishment or judgement on Paul for past sins or failure. There's no hint of this in

Paul's thought. Neither did this represent a lesser degree of Christ's love for Paul. Nor did it lessen his value as a person or a servant of Christ—he was and remained an apostle. At the same time it did not diminish the ability of Christ's power to work in and through Paul. Judgement, love, value, and ability are not in question here, and it's helpful to recognize this because these are the places where our minds sometimes go when we're wrestling with our own issue, or when we wonder about this in the life of another in faith. These are off the table. Now just to be clear, the thorn in the flesh doesn't represent some type of persistent sin in one's life. That's a different issue with a different remedy and a subject for another time. Here we are talking about a type of persistent deprivation, or malady, or pain that touches us personally but is, by and large, a feature of the human condition causing a certain level of distress.

So the existential questions are settled, but that's of marginal benefit when you're dealing with pointed distress. Intense pain or extreme frustration with limitation or deprivation will capture your attention and cause you to question your beliefs about yourself, others, even God as you plead for relief and look for a way forward. So what is that way forward?

A start on that way is to resist the temptation to place a value on that thorn—using that term now inclusively. As human beings we gravitate towards making decisions and assessing situations dualistically—things are either right or wrong, good or bad, liked or disliked. And as Christ followers we kick it up a notch adding righteous or evil to the mix, and this is where deserved or not comes into play. A more helpful approach simply recognizes the thorn's presence without assigning value—it just is, and it exists as one item among a range of possibilities present in the human condition. As people of faith we have to clear the hurdle that marks our thorn as evidence of our collective guilt in the original fall—that it is a departure from what God intended. Even so, it is reality. Limitation and finitude are presently part of the human condition common to all—everyone Jesus healed during his ministry, even those he raised from death, all died again. We're not meant to live forever in this present state—thorns exist, and sometimes they persist—resist assigning them particular value.

Following close behind this start, is recognizing in the experience of the thorn, your solidarity with the human family. Not taking anything away from the intensity of your own distress, by accepting the reality of its presence in you and releasing your mind from the need to categorize it you can, as Liuan Huska recommends, learn to be present to others' pain, to creation's pain. Resisting the thorn, as she writes from her own experience, often only intensifies it and adds to one's anxiety. When you are open to the thorn, you recognize its contours and your response changes which opens your imagination to others experiencing distress. And this invites empathy and mercy which can lead to prayer for their well-being and action, as you are able to come alongside and be present to them in their moment. A burden shared is a burden lessened.

Not far behind this is the perspective that hews closer to Paul's—that of focus. Instead of rehearsing what you have lost, train your mind to focus on what you have. Many of you in our congregation are familiar with Tom who shared his own testimony some time back. A biking accident left him paralyzed—when we were gathering on Sundays his wheelchair would be wheeled into the center aisle as he worshipped with us. As I've gotten to know him through conversations after services, I know that he experiences regular pain—he struggles with mobility and has lost sensation in his extremities so rather than shake his hand—which he offers, I squeeze his shoulder where he does have sensation to convey welcome and warmth. Tom has told me more than once that he never focuses on what he cannot do and he never stops thinking about what he can. He's a regular part of our men's study group, he writes using a software program designed for this, and he enjoys conversation. I don't want to minimize the seriousness of his situation, nor do I want to disrespect him by comparison with others, but I do want to lift him up as someone who has taught me this lesson as he so beautifully lives out its truth.

Tom has learned what Paul heard Jesus say in response to his prayers over the thorn: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Friends, the thorn in your life does not prevent you from being whole in Christ. As a follower of Jesus, his grace

permeates you—grace is the power of God at work in you to enable to be and to do what you cannot do in your own strength. God's grace is shaping your inner life to match the inner life of Jesus—you manifest the character of Christ and display his glory even if you have physical limitations, even with a persistent malady, even through the fatigue of chronic pain, even if your life hasn't turned out the way you envisioned. Who you are within is who are in Christ, and whatever you do is done in the strength that God provides—however feeble that may appear, it magnifies the glory of God for the peace of Christ settles your mind and directs your focus to God's purpose for you and through you.

We are all of us weak in comparison to Christ no matter our circumstances. Likewise, in Christ, we are all of us strong in his grace that prevails for us, that sustains us, and is sufficient for this moment and all that follow. AMEN