

The Thorns

2 Corinthians 12: 2-10

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Anybody who plays golf knows about handicaps. It's a number that is close to our average score above par. For instance, a ten handicapper would normally shoot around eighty-two or ten over par. Everybody who plays golf carries a handicap.

As in golf, such is life. Which is to say, we all carry handicaps into this game we call life. Our handicaps are the things that impede us. We call them by different names... our weaknesses, our problems, our character flaws, our personality disorders, and so forth. But Paul, our apostolic friend, called his handicap his "thorn in the flesh." Whatever our handicap is and whatever we may call it, we hate and despise it; and furthermore, and wish we were free from it.

I contend that all of us carry these handicaps. Some are physical, some are mental, some are moral, some are emotional, some are spiritual. Our handicaps show up in our work, some show up in our family life, some deal with our relationship with God, and often they manifest themselves in our relationships with people.

My guess is that we all know what our handicap is, this thorn in the flesh that we wish would go away or we could overcome.

I

Today's scripture is one of the most important passages in the New Testament. It is from Paul's letter to the Corinthian congregation. Paul was a church planter who had an organized Christian community in the diverse seaport town of Corinth. The church was full of growing up problems, similar to those we experience in adolescence. It's members struggled with their Christian identity and struggled to live out the teachings of Jesus. Paul, in addressing their array of problems in his letter, became self-disclosing about his own problems. He didn't say it this way exactly, but I get the sense he wanted to say: "You think you have problems. Let me tell you about my own."

He told them he possessed a "thorn in his flesh, "a handicap, a weakness, that tormented him. He said that he prayed three times for God to take it away... but to no avail.

Now the truth is no one really knows what Paul's thorn in the flesh was and he never really says. So every biblical scholar under the sun has an opinion about Paul's thorn in the flesh: having bad eyes, being almost deaf, suffering from malaria, or epilepsy, suffering unresolved

guilt over something he had done, feeling persistent lust, or having some facial deformity making him physically unattractive. Some feel that he was physically frail; others have suggested that he suffered from depression or anger management. The truth is, we just don't know...and theories are just that. What we do know is that whatever it was, it was a very real problem for him and he was tormented by it.

II

And us? What is our thorn in the flesh? There are a number of ways in which our handicaps affect us but I have come to believe that there is a crucial intersection between our handicap and our faith.

What I have discovered is when it comes to faith, our primary question is not about theology or doctrine. No, our primary question is how our faith deals with our handicap, this thorn that renders our greatest pain and frustration.

For instance, if we are born with some physical problem, one that renders us different from our peers, our spiritual question will revolve around how God, how faith, deals with this handicap.

Or if we grow up in a home environment that is erratic, unstable or a place where love is absent or conditional, then our spiritual journey will view faith through this lens: will faith provide us with stability and love? If we can't find that in the church, or from people who say they are Christians, then following Jesus will not have much appeal.

Or if a handicap prevents us from being the person we need and want to be then we will look at faith, and God, through that lens.

Or if our desire is a life that is secure and deep with love but a marriage, or a particular relationship, turned out to be disastrous, then we will ask how faith works in these areas or how God figures into all of this. And that struggle will determine the depth and character of our spiritual life.

III

All of us have our weaknesses and handicaps. Our choices in how we face these are, of course, unlimited. We are sometimes angry, or rebellious, or frustrated, or feel defeated. Sometimes we curse God, or life, or ourselves.

We can think, "How different I could be, how different my life could be, if only I did not have to deal with this weakness, this handicap."

Paul must have had similar thoughts because he has prayed three times —and I suspect more — to be rid of his handicap. Even the spiritual giants pray for relief.

And what was God's answer?

That answer that would shape Paul's life. Paul reports *this* was God's answer: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

It is one of the most important truths of the Christian faith and one of the great paradoxes of the spiritual life, because it is through our handicaps that God's power is brought forth in us. In fact, it is in our handicaps (that we think are our weaknesses,) that we discover strength and power.

We look at people such as Helen Keller and her blindness, deafness and muteness and we see how her handicaps molded and formed her life of significance.

Because here is the truth: the struggle to overcome our handicaps (using God's grace and power) develops capacities within us that would otherwise never have been developed.

Winston Churchill had such a lisp that he was advised against entering any occupation where speaking was important. Or think about Stevie Wonder, the great musician who was born blind, or British physicist Steven Hawking who suffering with ALS only to become the greatest theoretical physicist since Einstein. And I remember Jim Abbot, who was born with one hand. This one-handed baseball player pitched ten years in the majors and including no hitter when he played with the Yankees.

Which is to say when God's grace is sufficient, we access the power to develop capacities that we never would have developed.

Many years ago, a young doctor delivered a baby to a poor family in Montana. The child had one cruelly deformed leg and great difficulty breathing. The doctor thought of the unhappiness this child would encounter and considered momentarily doing nothing for his breathing and just letting the child die. However, he breathed life into the child and the child lived.

Years later this doctor had a granddaughter who was stricken with a crippling condition. He learned, however, of a young doctor in the Midwest who had been getting excellent results in the treatment of this particular disease and so he took his granddaughter to see him.

It turned out the young physician was physically impaired and walked with a severe limp. And you guessed it. He was the deformed baby this doctor had delivered thirty-five years earlier. And because of his own infirmity, the young doctor had focused and specialized in crippling diseases.

Which is to say, it is our area of greatest pain that becomes our passion and catalyst... and we feel the power of God to use our weaknesses for good, especially for the good of others.

I remember the story of an honors chemistry college student who began having mental health issues while in college. She was accepted into Vanderbilt Medical School, but while there went into several dark periods of mental health. She left school twice and was finally diagnosed with a form of schizophrenia and mood disorder. She tried to end her life and the

pain one day, but after she had cut herself badly, her phone rang and it was her therapist calling because she had missed her appointment. Soon help arrived. The medical student prayed, “God if you are out there, give me a reason to live.”

She eventually finished medical school and is now a psychiatrist and a mental health advocate. She is active in her church. She serves in a clinic for people with severe mental illnesses and says hope is the most powerful of all medicines.

IV

Do you hear what Paul is saying to us? What the Christian faith is saying to us?

It is through our weakness that we discover our strength. It is through our weakness that we realize our own inadequacy and let God in. It is through our weakness that God infuses us with power for God’s great purposes.

Or as Paul says — *When I am weak, then I am strong.*

Is it true? Can it be true?

If we are blessed or discerning or just plain tired of having our life being derailed by our handicaps, we can begin to take on a certain humility; this humility enables us to discover that we are not smart enough, strong enough, or clever enough to figure it out, to solve the problem, to prescribe our own cure.

Humility is God’s doorway.

Humility — lives in grace —and it’s where God’s power is made perfect in our weakness.