

A thorn in the flesh

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

A Sermon for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Here we are on a hot Sunday in July, and many others are off vacationing in the shade. Why are we here? Perhaps you wish you were on vacation in the shade, but it's good you are here because life and death issues are at stake.

The assigned Epistle lesson for today is about the "thorn in the flesh." People have heard that phrase, that metaphor. It's familiar in our language. Most people, however, don't know where it is, and what it's about. Is it like a painful sliver or hangnail? No, that's not what it's about.

Rather, the "thorn in the flesh" is important for what it means for being here. Why are we here on a hot July Sunday morning?

We ask ourselves: What is this thorn in the flesh about? It says in 2 Corinthians 12 that Paul had had a vision. In this chapter he talks about it (paraphrase): "I've had religious experiences, visions and revelations. I don't know if I was in the third or fourth heaven. I've had these experiences, so I am not denying that I have had revelations." He mentions them also in Galatians 1:16.

But just before our text for today, he writes in 2 Corinthians 11:14 that he knows that religious visions can deceive, as he says: "Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light." That is right there so he's aware of the problem of appealing to visions and revelations.

Then he goes on and talks about the thorn in the flesh. We don't know what it was, but it probably meant that he had epilepsy, as we know from other things, or that he had had really poor eyesight, or that he had problem stuttering. Or it could have been several of these things. In any case, he had a real problem.

And it says he prayed three times, not just once, not just casually. "Three" in Scripture is that number of completeness. It means he really, continually prayed. But nothing happened. This is Paul, not somebody else, Paul, the great Christian leader, and the answer was "No."

He asked for a miracle, this one who had had revelations. And the answer was "No." It didn't happen. But rather the answer came: "My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Paul then responds: "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong." That's a great promise.

The trouble with it is that for most people it's flipped over. It turns out to be: "Well, whatever happens is God's will, and everything is good finally, finally everything is relative, and finally, so what?"

The prevailing religion of our day and our culture is a religion of Mosch (German for rubbish, junk). That is: You kind of just work your way through because finally everything just works out, but we don't know how. Just get along. That's what it's about. Everything is the same. Everything is grace. It's like that old book, *I'm O.K. You're O.K.* We're all O.K. Just go along. It's really the same religion as Hinduism, Buddhism, and a lot of other religions. Everything is fine finally. Just don't think about it. Just keep busy.

It's nothing new. It is not even unique to today. If you go back to the time of Christ, the first century, and if you were in Rome or Jerusalem, you'd find a different temple on every corner for a different god. People thought: "Well, I better do something for this one, and I better attend to something for that one." In the seventeenth chapter of Acts, there is an account of Paul in Athens, Greece, and there he found a temple to the unknown god (Acts 17:23). They even had a temple to an unknown god because, well, they didn't want to miss one. They had temples that covered all the bases, and finally, it's all god and all the same.

We have that same universalism today. This idea, the religion of Mosch. And those who hold that are caught in the problem of justice and meaninglessness. If that were the case, then there is no justice finally and no meaning finally. You better just coast, and finally everything is Mosch.

Over against that is: What happens when there is a crisis? As in the Psalm for today, Psalm 123, which is a prayer for help. This person begs the Lord on behalf of his people: "Our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he have mercy upon us" (Psalm 123:2). "Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us" (vs 3). It's like Paul (paraphrase): I have a thorn in the flesh! Answer me! Enter not into judgment with me! Remember your promises! I stretch out my hands for you. Answer me quickly, O Lord. My spirit fails. Hide not your face from me.

It is really the same as the Twenty-Third Psalm, especially that famous fourth verse: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death." As you may know, if you look at the footnote to that verse, it points out deep darkness isn't only about death, but about all the thorns in the flesh. It's about meaninglessness and general whatever. It's about that loneliness and desperation. Whatever the deep darkness is that comes, the Psalmist says: "I will fear no evil, none whatsoever."

We try. Yet we live lives of quiet desperation. We try to make things nice, to do something, but finally of course, there is that deep darkness, and that's why it's important to go back to the text in 2 Cor 12:10. It isn't about general grace. It isn't about some kind of Mosch: Everything is fine. We're fine. God is fine.

Rather, it says: "My power" (vs. 9). "My grace is sufficient for you" (vs. 9), and what the Lord is saying is because of what he has done. The only answer is that he died and rose again.

Paul goes on in 2 Corinthians 12:11: "I have been a fool!" That's a key word pointing out, over against all of the Mosch religion of the world, stands the folly of the cross. He writes in 1 Corinthians 1:22 that Jews seek miracles, Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, which is a scandal to those seeking miracles, and foolishness to those seeking wisdom, but to those who are being saved, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

When the text says: "My power" (2 Corinthians 12:9), it's referring to the power of the cross and resurrection, which is what makes all the difference.

Paul goes on in the next verse to say: "Hey, I can do miracles, but that's not what it's about." He points out, using three different Greek words so he covers all the bases (paraphrase): I've done signs and miracles, but that's not what it's about. Our only hope, our final hope, our living hope in life and in death is what God has done in Jesus Christ through the cross and resurrection.

And it is something that is then ours here and now. Luther writes in his Small Catechism in the Third Commandment: "Remember this day to keep it holy." Why? "We should fear and love God, and so we should not despise his Word or the hearing of it, but deem it holy and gladly hear and learn it."

Why are we here? Because this is where it happens. The promises come in the Word alone. It's grace alone, through Christ alone, in the cross alone, but it's also in the Word alone, and the Word is that which is proclaimed and the Word is that which is received in Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

It's not some sort of Mosch. This is where it happens. This is the promise. This is our hope, our living hope in life and in death. Amen