

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost: July 7, 2024

Grace is Enough

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Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on this seventh Sunday after Pentecost. I think today's readings are particularly important as we move through unprecedented times in our country, the weather, the church, and also in our own particular lives.

I begin with our reading of Paul's letter to the Corinthians. One day a number of years ago when I was trying to prune some roses without wearing gloves, a thorn got lodged in one of my fingers. It was such a small thing, but it irritated me for days. I couldn't get it out because it was so small, and it was consistently painful no matter what I did. Finally, it did fester its way out; but I was amazed that such a small thing could hurt so much and for so long.

Biblical scholars have a lot of theories about what Paul's 'thorn' was, and I believe whatever it was, it may have been the result of his conversion experience on the road. His own reference to that experience was, he is not sure how to describe it, having been caught up, so to speak. Over the years people have argued that it might have been poor eyesight, a physical disability, mental illness, struggles with his sexuality, or demonic oppression. Interestingly enough, Paul doesn't tell us what his 'thorn' was and maybe that helps us hear what Paul is saying, from the perspective of our own 'thorns'.

Just about all of us have something that makes life hard or causes us to suffer. If you're one of the lucky ones right now, whose life is flowing smoothly, please stop to thank God for his blessings to you. However, if you're hearing Paul's words about his 'thorn' and can identify with his struggle, then it might be disappointing to hear God's reply is that His grace is all you need.

When we are suffering from thorns, it's fair and right to ask God to take them away, just like Paul did, and he did it three times. It makes sense to think that because God loves us, he wants us to be happy. We also assume that because God is all-powerful, he can take away any thorn. When he doesn't take the thorn away, no matter what the thorn may be, we can start to doubt the love and goodness of God. We can begin to question if he cares, or if he is able to do what he promises, or even if God exists at all. When God fails to take away our thorns, we can start to feel like God has failed us.

However, in this lesson Paul is asking us to rely on our faith and God's grace. We don't know who Paul would have been had his thorn been removed. He does seem a little boastful here. What we do know is that his victory over his trouble, whatever that may have been, became a testament to his faith. We don't know who we would be if our lives were easy-peasy, but we have, I am sure, over the years learned our own strengths and weaknesses. Maybe this is the grace. The grace to see that our situations contain both curse and blessing, causing us stress but yet managing to grow in our personal lives and relationships. Is it possible God doesn't need to change a thing, no matter our pleas?

When God says that his grace is all we need, he's asking us to look for him beyond our immediate experiences. Rather than focus on our own subjective understanding of God and what he can do, God wants us to look to the most complete expression of his grace – the person of Jesus, to help us find solace. To understand God suffers with us.

This leads me to the Gospel at hand. Jesus' radical acceptance to take on injustice, accept those on the margins, and heal those who came to him in faith is the example of God's grace. Yet those in Jesus' home town refused to believe God had answered their prayers. God's grace was brought home to them, yet it was ignored, leaving these people unhealed.

I can imagine the inner suffering of Jesus as he leaves what used to be a familiar home town to him. Jesus was offering healing to the sick, yet because it did not come in the

shape they expected it to come in, they rejected him, and in doing so harmed themselves. Maybe the grace you have been looking for is right in front of you; a new friendship, a phone call just when you need one, or finding an extra dollar in your jacket pocket. Grace abounds if we only allow it.

It would be poor pastoral care to say to someone who is suffering their own particular thorn, not to worry because God's grace should be enough. It can trivialize both the thorns they are enduring as well as the grace of God. However, I do believe that whatever our thorns may be, God's grace in Jesus has everything we need to not only endure the thorns we may be experiencing, but for God to work good through them in our lives and in the lives of the people around us.

Paul's thorn was given to him so he would rely on God's grace rather than his own experience. What if it is the same for us – that God allows us to carry our own thorns so that we would learn to rely on his grace, grow in that grace, and become more grace-giving and compassionate to the people around us?

We live in challenging times, and we are being called to model God's love. We are being called to growth from the pains of living in an imperfect world where evil abounds, and yet still see the good. We are called to take our weaknesses, and through faith and the grace of God, become stronger for it.

I challenge you this week to put the salve of Christ on your thorns and wounds, the faith that God is with you in this, rather than have you turn away. Look for those miracles, those moments of beauty – enjoy the rose, in spite of the thorns. Find grace among the chaos. Find strength in your weakness, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.