

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon Text: 2 Corinthians 12:2-10
Related text: Mark 6:1-13
Date Preached: July 5, 2009

Grace to you and peace from God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Sunday after Sunday we include in the prayers of the church the names of congregation members and people we know who are in some ways suffering. Every Wednesday morning at 8:30, anyone who is able is welcome to come and offer prayers for those we know to be sick and in need of healing.

I'd imagine that those we name know what it means to suffer pain. Some of the pains are chronic from the arthritis in our joints to the wear and tear we've put our bodies through during the years of our youth.

The physical pains we feel can leave us with feelings of helplessness. They can leave us fearful that we will never be the same. A wake up ritual of showering, getting dressed, having breakfast that once may have taken an hour now becomes an all morning activity.

These are but a few of the physical pains that some of us suffer. There are other pains that we feel as well, but for today we are focusing on the physical. For

you see, the physical pains and inadequacies we feel can lead us into a false perception of who we are as a child of God.

This is the type of stuff that the Apostle Paul is addressing to the church in Corinth. He's heard judgments from others that he is not better than other apostles. Paul is dealing with some form of physical affliction that others use against him as a means of discrediting who he is and the message he shares. To put it another way, there were others who see Paul as a metaphorical "pain in the neck."

One very human response to any kind of suffering is to ask the question, "Why me, God?" It is a question asked among many in Scripture from Moses to Job, David to Jonah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. I remember times in my own life when I've asked that very question, "Why me?"

The question itself reflects a certain selfishness that we have when it comes to how we view suffering. In some ways suffering comes to us as a surprise, and hits us like a pin that hits our balloon. Our balloon pops and we are wondering what has happened?

If God would only take away that which causes our suffering, then not only would we feel better but we

may be of more use as a child of God. In fact, Paul falls into the very line of thinking as he shares with his congregation. “Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me.” Yet, Paul’s thorn in the flesh is not removed.

When we find ourselves suffering we are likely to pray for cures and healing. We might appeal to God a lot more than three times to simply remove our own “thorn in the flesh”. And when that prayer seems to go unanswered, we may find ourselves dealing with it by comparing our suffering to others. “Oh, but it could be worse”.

People of God; our heavenly Father who loves us beyond all measure has another answer. I believe it is the same response God gives to Paul.

“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.”

Paul’s response to those who would question his ability to witness to Christ is to boast that it is because of Christ that I can do what I do in spite of my suffering. The statement of truth is that in weakness, “the power of Christ may dwell in me.”

It is to say that God can and does use our inadequacies and our sufferings to make the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ known in our midst. Such news is the good news of hope to us and to others that no amount of suffering can separate us from God's love.

By the help of the Holy Spirit we believe in the good news of Jesus Christ even in the midst of our physical ailments

In the end, it isn't about us at all. What lies at the heart of everything is God. We gather here in the midst of our pains not simply to go away feeling good or that we've done our duty, but to worship God.

Yes, we gather to pray for others, for their cures and healing. We are brought together as church to intercede for others. Yet, day after day God uses the pains in our neck to be a witness to those asking the "Why me" question.

Our response is from God who says, "My grace is sufficient for you". It is God who will use our weaknesses as a witness to the presence of Christ in our lives. With Christ in our lives we are living testimonies to the new life we have in him. With

Christ we can be content, which is different from being happy. For our contentment is to live in the presence of Christ, and thus God's grace empowers me each day I live with my thorn in the flesh.
AMEN.