

The Seventh Sunday After Pentecost

July 19, 2009

Amazing Grace Lutheran Church - Pastor Chip Wilke

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (NIV)

When we ask for something we will get one of three main responses. The answer in some words or another is either going to be yes, wait, or the ever dreaded no. For some young children the word "no" is the single worst word in the English language. They do not like to be told no. Does that ever really change as we get older? "Did I get the job or promotion? Can I have a loan? Doctor, are you sure there isn't anything else you can do for me?" "No." Who of us would say we like to hear the answer "no"?

Now what about when it comes to our requests of God? How does our Father in heaven respond to our heartfelt prayers? God will give us what we ask, won't He? We are His children and we know how much the Lord loves and cares for us so He will provide what we ask of Him and say yes to our earnest requests, right? The Scripture before us this morning answers some of those questions. As we see the Lord's response to the apostle Paul, as the Lord answers all our prayers in the way that He sees best, I pray we learn and never forget: **Why God's no is still good enough.**

The apostle Paul had a problem. It appeared to be a painful problem. Paul refers to it as "*a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan.*" He says this thorn or pointed stake tormented him. There is much speculation as to exactly what was Paul's thorn in the flesh. Many believe it was some kind of sickness such as malaria or epilepsy. Others believe it had something to do with the fact he had trouble writing with his own hand. Some say Paul may have had a speech impediment because he refers to not being eloquent of tongue. These are just some of the many, many guesses and we finally have to say we don't know for sure. But we know that this was something that continually troubled Paul. So much so that Paul remembers three specific times when he earnestly turned to God with one request in mind. "*Take it away from me Lord.*" Paul pleaded that this thorn in the flesh depart from him.

What would the Lord do for his servant? What would God say to this child who turned to Him and pleaded for help? How would the Lord answer this apostle who served the Lord with his life? Did you catch it? The Lord tells his servant, his child, his apostle "no." God is not going to take this from Paul. The Lord lets Paul know that he is going to have to keep living with this thorn in the flesh.

But did you also hear why God's no is still good enough? "*But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you.'*" The Lord reminds Paul that He has already given Paul all He needs and more and it is all wrapped up in that little powerful word - grace. That will suffice. God loved Paul when Paul did nothing to deserve it. God saved Paul when

he should have been condemned. The Lord made Paul his own when he had been God's enemy. The Lord washed Paul clean from every sin through the blood of His own Son. The Lord prepared for Paul a place of eternal glory that far outweighs any earthly suffering. That's grace and that's all Paul needed. That's where the Lord wanted Paul's focus to remain.

In fact, the Lord also said ***"for my power is made perfect in weakness."*** Paul realized as he said twice in the original language for emphasis in our first verse of our text that this thorn was to keep him from becoming conceited. The Lord wanted to keep Paul humble. God wanted Paul to rely on Him and Him alone. He wanted Him to remember that the power of God is in the message of the gospel and not in the messenger.

And Paul finally got it. Listen to his beautiful response: ***"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."*** Paul doesn't act like a spoiled child who didn't get his way. He says if God gave this to me then I am going to rejoice in it. Paul says he will rejoice in all his weaknesses so that ***"Christ's power may rest on me."*** Literally it reads *"that the power of Christ might tent over"* him. Paul realized that when he was helpless He needed to look to Christ. When he was weak He needed to rely on the Lord. That is why when he was weak, then he was really strong. That is why Paul learned that even God's no is still good enough for him.

Dear friends, is this not an invaluable lesson for us? Perhaps the Holy Spirit did not reveal Paul's specific thorn in the flesh so that every single one of us can relate. We all have our thorns in the flesh. We have our specific pains and trials and suffering. We have issues that torment us and trouble us. I'm sure each of us can think of things that we have taken to the Lord in prayer, perhaps on countless occasions.

Yet, how do we respond when the Lord's answer to take away a certain thorn appears to be "no?" Would we admit that we haven't always delighted in weakness, in insult, in hardship, in persecution, in difficulties? Have there been times we have fallen into the worldly way of thinking that only when I have status, power, influence, wealth and health, then I am strong? Don't we have to confess too often we have forgotten that the Christian way is to say only when I am weak, when I recognize all that I have and all that the world sees as symbols of strength is not anything but Christ is everything, only then I am strong? Do we ever act like little children who still think "no" is the worst word in the English language? Do ever forget why God's no is still good enough for us?

Do we really want God to give us everything for which we ask? Sometimes we need to hear "no." If the Lord told the dedicated apostle Paul "no" I'm sure there will be times when God needs to tell us "no." But of this we can be absolutely sure - the answer will always be what is for our best. In fact you may recall another familiar prayer that was given the answer "no." It was a prayer spoken by God's very own Son. Remember this other prayer spoken in a garden called Gethsemane - this other prayer also spoken three times. *"If there is another way Father...if it is possible Father remove this cup of suffering from me...let there be another way than for me to take all the sin and shame and guilt of the entire world and suffer and bear it all on the dreadful cross...if possible take this suffering away from me...yet not as I will, but as you will."* In those next hours the Lord answered His own Son He loved with a resounding "no."

That was so the Lord could provide us with all that we need. That was so that God could shower us with His undeserved love. That is so Christ's power may tent over us. God sent Jesus to the cross and grave and then out of the grave so that He can now say to each one of us: "***My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.***" Like God did for Paul, the Lord wants to teach us to rely on His grace. We need the Lord for everything. Without God we could do nothing. Without Christ we would be lost for all eternity.

Through our thorns in the flesh the Lord focuses our eyes back on Him for all things both physical and spiritual. As children who once hated that they didn't get everything they wanted from their parents later realize it was good for them to hear "no", we too learn to put our trust in our Father. God knows what He is doing in our lives. He teaches us that when we are weak, when we realize without Jesus we are helpless and lost, only then are we strong. For then we see our need to trust in our Savior and lean on His grace as the most important thing in our lives.

So I pray we thank the Lord for His grace every day. I pray we keep bringing the Lord all our heartfelt requests. I pray we know that He hears and answers everyone in the way that is best for us. I pray we learn to trust in our God in all things. Whether our prayers are answered with a yes, a wait, or even with a no, I pray we never forget why even God's no is still good enough. In fact, even God's "no" is a reason to rejoice. That's the difference grace makes dear friends - it is more than sufficient for us! Amen.