

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, July 4, 2021**

“A Thorn Was Given Me”

Guest Preacher: Margaret McGugan

Nearly 8 decades after it was written, a British soldier's letter to his family finally made it home. Harry Cole was shot by a sniper in the Second World War during a retreat to Dunkirk. Three days before he died, Harry wrote a letter to his mother telling her to 'not worry about him and that he would get through it okay'.

Apparently, Harry's letter ended up in the attic of a German officer and finally made its way home for family members to read. While the letter never reached his mother, it did finally reach his brother. It is incredible to think that an archivist was able to connect the dots by recognizing the name on a village war memorial, so many years ago and how this letter affected the family today.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians was written centuries ago assuring the church that if they trusted in his ministry, then all would be okay.

Paul's letter was delivered to Corinth perhaps months after he wrote it, during a time of rivalry and the teaching of false apostles.

It was a battle of wills as Paul tried to assert his vindication of apostleship over and above the false apostles.

It seems the church at Corinth was surrounded with idolatry and immorality and self-professed apostles who captured the imagination of many people in the Church. Their tales of personal experiences in the spiritual realm allotted them a privileged relationship with God.

Or so they thought.

It seemed like a lost cause for Paul, who not only was vindicating his authority and intention, but more accurately, trying to boast without boasting.

And so, we read the account of his rapture with Christ Jesus on the Road to Damascus in third person language. 'I know a person in Christ..... who was caught up to the third heaven', he recalls.

But how does one talk about oneself without an air of boasting? How does one vindicate their authenticity to the Gospel when acquaintances mock and denounce their good intentions?

The letter's contents held more vindication than 'don't worry, I will get through it okay.'

Paul was fighting toe to toe with these assimilated apostles who were not backing down from the fight. They had a lot to lose if they lost the battle. The Corinthians had a lot to lose if Paul did not win.

In an earlier section of this letter, Paul begins with what is customarily referred to as his 'fool's speech which literally mocks his opponents.

Paul would rather be a fool and speak about God's authority than be the one who speaks of human standards or one speaking 'according to the flesh'.

Many scholars have written their thoughts about this letter over the years.

One such thought discusses how the false apostles disguised themselves as ‘ministers of righteousness’ turning the Corinthians into their slaves—preying on and taking advantage of them: shaming them and perhaps even abusing them physically.

Many Corinthians had been slaves and were accustomed to abusive behaviour. Not that this was a justifiable reason, it was not, and Paul refused to treat these people in such a manner.

He believed he was to be an exemplar of Christ Jesus first and foremost.

Paul continues to write that he will not boast except on his weaknesses and to keep him from being too elated, a thorn was given him in the flesh to keep him humble.

I wonder if the ‘thorn’ given to Paul is referring to the frustration Paul was feeling during this time because some believers of the church were easily swayed with these smooth-talking apostles who executed their ministry with elegant speech and boasted of revelations and visions.

The tone throughout this section is critical, as Paul responds directly to the charges made against him. He knew these apostles had entered this church only to turn the congregation against him.

Paul disagrees with their approach; but he does play their game on their turf. He shows his power and his authority as superior and different from them. All his arguments about this important issue of power have come indirectly from his weakness. And this power, comes from Christ who nurtures his weakness.

In an indirect response, in a ‘tongue in cheek approach’, he relates his own story on the Road to Damascus in third person narrative so that it would not be linked directly to him.

Only God, Christ and he were privy to it and his authenticity could get no higher approval than that.

The real difference between Paul and these other apostles is that he would die in the name of Christ if it came down to that.

In the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, the word *thorn* means “something which frustrates and causes trouble in the lives of those afflicted.”

The ‘thorn’ given to Paul may have been from psychological disorders to physical disorders such as bad eyesight, stomach problems, and epilepsy. We can never know what the ‘thorn is, and I wonder if we need to know.

We do know that Paul earnestly appealed to God for its removal, only to be told, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness’.

What Paul knew only too well was that ‘weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities were far more frequent and typical of his apostolic life.

A *given thorn* is not a flesh wound that a band aid will hide but a deep wound festering with fears and uncertainties that requires God’s trust for strength to endure the hardships associated with the thorn.

I am sure we have all prayed to God asking for a thorn to be removed from our lives only to hear a heavenly voice say, ‘Yes, No or not yet’.

This is a hard pill to swallow especially when we pray earnestly asking God to take away a thorn that is burrowing itself into our life.

It is a hard pill to swallow when we really do not know how in weakness, we will be strong.

‘In our weakness we will find strength’, is an oxymoron like jumbo shrimp. A mind teaser that takes a minute to register its true meaning.

And we are not alone hearing that emphatic NO.

David prayed his son might live.

Moses prayed to enter the Promised Land.

Jesus prayed the cup be passed from him.

Paul prayed the thorn to be removed.

Harry Cole, the soldier in our opening story, prayed to come home.

'In our weakness we will find strength'.

I wonder how in our weakness we will eradicate the thorn of prejudice, xenophobia, and racial indifferences?

I wonder how in our weakness we will build up a divided Presbyterian Church now that Remits B and C are passed into church law?

Our church has now okayed LGBTQI people to the election of elders and the call to ministry of Word and Sacrament.

I wonder if Paul's letter addressed to the Corinthians decades ago, can help us address our concerns today?

Harry Cole's letter was written in a time of war. Although he did not come home, his letter did. Not to his mother but to his siblings.

The thorn of war took Harry's life, but before his death, he still wrote to his mother to assure her that he would get through it okay.

I wonder in our weakness will we feel God's strength.

If we concentrate on the pain of the thorn, then we could miss the grace-filled answer from God filled with His mercy and love because our attention is not focused on God.

What thorn do each of us still bear?

These human characteristics are not flesh wounds but deep-rooted fears. These characteristics affect the mind and body and soul differently for each individually.

We are presently facing a struggle over the issue of doctrine and procedure that is splitting the church community right down the middle.

We must risk trusting each other at new pinnacles of diversity as we pray for mountains to become hills and we must practice the kind of Spirit-fueled compassion and ingenuity that finds a way where there appears to be no way.

Our culture is eyeing the churches these days, testing our credibility. Congregations may imagine that they cannot think about public witness until their internal problems, doctrinal and budgetary, are all resolved. But it may be precisely our internal challenges that press us into the kind of engagement with each other and with the Spirit that can turn us, sooner rather than later, away from cloying self-absorption and outward to the world God loves.

Even in our weakness, maybe even because of it, we become credible witnesses of saving news in this frantic, fearful world.

Paul tells us in I Corinthians, that 'the weakness of God is stronger than human strength, because what seems foolish in God is wiser than humans; and what seems feeble in God is stronger than humans.'

A final scholar's commentary on this text is this---'Paul offers no escape route from pain but, rather holds up a way of dwelling with Christ during it. To be sure, there are thorns that can be eliminated and should be. To do less is to ignore both the justice and good sense; suffering is not of the Lord. But when it is unavoidable, as indeed it is, weakness, need be no cause for shame or abject resignation. God's power after all took a hideous crucifixion and turned it into grace—raised up human vulnerability in extremis and made it perfect.'

Now that is something to boast about!

Amen.