



Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time B July 8, 2018

- **Paul's thorn in the flesh—power at work in weakness, a very important spiritual principle**
- **Five suggestions for spending quiet time with Jesus in the Chapel**

This Sunday, we listened to one of the best known passages in all of Paul's writings. Before I offer some reflections on it, let me share with you this reading.

Brothers and sisters: That I, Paul, might not become too elated, because of the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, an angel of Satan, to beat me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I begged the Lord about this that it might leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me. Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

Reflection #1

Commenting on this text, Patricia Sanchez writes:

So many of the people we regard as great have had tremendous obstacles to overcome on their respective paths to greatness. John Milton was blind. Beethoven and Thomas Edison were deaf. Franklin D. Roosevelt was crippled. Abraham Lincoln failed in two businesses, had a nervous breakdown, was rejected from law school, lost four jobs and eight elections before he was elected President.

In this reading, Paul speaks about his own struggles. We cannot know for sure what he meant by the phrases "thorn in the flesh" and "an angel of Satan to beat me." While Paul could have had some inner psychological or physical problem, scholars tend to believe "the thorn in the flesh" was some outer problem Paul encountered in his opponents and critics. Whatever the problem, Paul prayed three times for the Lord to remove it (recall Jesus prayed three times in Gethsemane for God to let his "cup of suffering" pass from him). We can presume Paul was reluctant to accept his "thorn in the flesh" not because he did not want to suffer, but because he saw it as an impediment to his ministry.

God's response to Paul was: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." God wants to use Paul's crisis to keep him humble and dependent on God. Paul's supernatural visions and revelations could have led to spiritual pride. Gradually, Paul came to see that he experienced divine power most when he was vulnerable, humble, and powerless before God. This experience leads Paul to boast or rejoice in his weakness or in the insults and hardships of his ministry because it was in those moments that he most of all experienced God's power, divine touch and sufficient grace.

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Reflection: What speaks to you most in the above piece?

Reflection #2

Power at work in weakness

Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' could have been an inner weakness or an outer obstacle to his ministry. Either way, he came to a point of praising God for it ("*I rejoice in my weakness*"). In and through his thorn in the flesh, he experienced God's power as never before. Hence, the birth of the spiritual principle "power in weakness."

When we experience some inner weakness or outer 'thorn in the flesh,' we want God to fix it. Few, if any of us, want God to say to us: "No, I am not going to remove this difficulty. Rather, I am going to use it to help you experience my power in a mighty way."

This is exactly what millions of people involved in AA programs experience. Their thorn in the flesh is their inability to manage alcohol (or any other addiction). For them to experience God's power in their weakness, they had to buy into or embrace the first three steps of AA's Twelve Step program, which are:

1. *We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.*
2. *Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore our sanity.*

3. *Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understand him.*

I think admitting our powerlessness over some area of our lives might be the biggest challenge. We are raised in an “I can do it” self-sufficiency culture. Hence, most, if not all of us, would have a hard time admitting our need for God to help us cope with an area of our lives that is out of control.

The Serenity Prayer—the full version which we don’t usually hear—was written by Reinhold Niebuhr, a Protestant theologian.

SERENITY PRAYER

*God, grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can,
and wisdom to know the difference.*

*Living one day at a time,
enjoying one moment at a time,
accepting hardship as pathway to peace,
taking, as Jesus did, this world as it is,
not as I would have it,
trusting that you will make all things
right if I surrender to your will—
So that I may be reasonably happy in this
life and supremely happy with you
forever in the next. Amen.*

Reflection #3

Indian Jesuit priest Vima Dasan writes that the thorn in the flesh could be at least three different things.

‘A thorn in the flesh’ could be a physical illness. My friend John was a successful executive. But in his early fifties, he was left incapacitated by a stroke. All of a sudden, his speech was slurred and impossible to understand most of the time. He was forced to depend upon others for even the most basic necessities. Frustration and humiliation flashed before his eyes. Used to doing everything for himself, he resented having to depend on others. He did not know why he should suffer this humiliating dependence. But God knew. John, ever since his teens, had been independent, a fighter, a loving husband and a caring father. But he never had any experience of being weak, of being provided for, of being loved. It took a stroke for him to have such an experience. He was a difficult patient, but through it all, his wife, his sons and his daughters stood by him, cared for him and loved him back to life. Health

regained was a valued treasure, but a greater treasure was to discover that being loved confers its own dignity. Was not God present in his illness?

‘Thorn in the flesh’ could take the form of rejection by others. Some are rejected because of color, race or nationality but when they keep on loving others, they soon see the dynamic presence of God in their rejected condition and win acceptance, love, even admiration. Some are rejected early in life as useless for the future. Bishop Fulton Sheen, the great preacher, was told by his college debate coach, “You are absolutely the worst speaker I ever heard.” Ernest Hemingway, the great novelist, was told by his teachers, “Forget about writing; you don’t have enough talent for it.” Richard Hooker, the author of MASH, had his book rejected by six publishers before it was finally accepted and became a runaway best seller. All such people were not disheartened by rejection, rather they continued to believe in their own worth and persevered in their efforts and God brought out of these rejected individuals the best they could offer to the world. Even our genuine love for others may be rejected, but if we don’t give up on love, we will soon possess the supreme happiness of life which is the conviction that we are loved.

‘Thorn in the flesh’ could mean also the ordinary, routine, humdrum things in life. There is a human temptation in all of us to fail to see God in the ordinary things in life and instead to seek him in the flamboyant, the unusual or exciting phenomenon. Often the longing to touch the presence of God sends us searching for visions and apparitions in faraway or near places, while his guaranteed presence is in the ordinary. Because we instinctively admire strength and expect to find it in our athletes, political leaders and armies, because we live in a society that gives great value to great deeds, weakness is something that we are less able to cope with and our being ordinary and fragile tends to leave us frustrated or depressed. At such moments we must recall that the joy of life depends not so much on what we do, but on what God does through us. And God would never permit any evil, if he could not bring good out of evil. He has in himself all power to protect us, all wisdom to direct us, all mercy to save us and all happiness to crown us.

Reflection: What speaks to you most in the above piece? What are your thoughts about the statement: *God would never permit evil if he could never bring good out of it.* Might there be a time when you might struggle believing that statement?

FIVE SUGGESTIONS FOR SPENDING QUIET TIME WITH JESUS

When people are asked to consider spending thirty minutes or an hour with Jesus, they often ask: “What would I do? How do I spend that time?” As you will see, the following suggestions can help, whether we are praying in the Adoration Chapel, in the Church before a closed tabernacle, or in our homes.

Suggestion #1: Take a moment to consciously become aware of God’s presence. In the Adoration Chapel or in Church, people usually begin their time of prayer by kneeling down before Jesus. For me personally, after taking a moment to consciously become aware of Jesus’ presence, I address the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I thank the Father for the many years of good life he has given me, for all the spiritual and material blessings of my life, and for my priesthood. I thank Jesus for paying the ultimate price for our salvation and for being our good and caring Shepherd. I thank the Holy Spirit for the countless number of ways he has guided me and helped me in my journey. Most importantly, I ask Jesus for the help I need to pray well during this holy hour.

Suggestion #2: Become aware of the thoughts and feelings we are bringing to this time of prayer. Our thoughts and feelings are a part of the true self we are bringing to this time of prayer. We should take a moment to become aware of what is going on within us at this time. Are we happy, trustful, sad, or fearful? We bring to prayer whatever mood we are in.

Suggestion #3: Spend some quiet time sitting in the loving presence of Jesus. This is an aspect of prayer that many of us may be uncomfortable with, simply because we find it difficult to just sit quietly and do nothing. The doing or active part of us may drive us to think that sitting quietly and doing nothing is a waste of valuable time. If we have a hard time *doing nothing* in prayer, we may need to remember the lovely words of Psalm 46:10, “Be still and know that I am God.” A medieval mystic once said: “While we rest in him, he works in us.” If we tend to be a busybody during our time of prayer, the above words should help us to see the value of resting in the Lord.

Many will say: “When I try to be *still*, my mind wanders.” I understand. I face this challenge every time I try to be still. Here are a couple of important things to keep in mind regarding distractions. We need to distinguish between *silly* or unimportant *distractions* (e.g., outside noises, who will win the football game this week, etc.) and distractions that are very much connected with our lives (e.g., a difficult relationship, anxiety over health, or a financial problem). Sometimes we are called to *pray* about a particular distraction, to

take it to God and seek his help and guidance. But sometimes we may feel that we want to put a particular issue aside so we can focus our attention on the Lord. On the issue of distractions, St. Francis de Sales said:

If the heart wanders or is distracted, bring it back quite gently and place it tenderly in God’s presence. And if you do nothing else while at prayer but bring your heart back again and again and place it in God’s presence, though it went away every time you brought it back, your time of prayer would be very well spent.

The devil will not want us to believe these encouraging words. But we do need to believe them. Sometimes in prayer, we may feel that we are being *sent away empty*. But if we have made a decent attempt to remain focused on Jesus, we should believe that he is indeed pleased with us. If our only focus is on what we are *getting out* of our prayer time (a consumerist mentality), we will end up feeling that this is a *waste of our valuable time*. On the other hand, if we can come to the Chapel *not* primarily to *receive* but to *give* Jesus some of our time and attention, we may discover the truth of the words: “In giving, we receive.” Just wanting to *hang out with Jesus, to waste time with him*, is a blessed and wonderful attitude to have.

Suggestion #4: Engage in spiritual reading. As stated in an earlier chapter, spiritual reading (often called *lectio divina*) nourishes, illumines, and gives direction to our deepest self. If we have time to read the newspaper, email, and Facebook, surely we can make time for spiritual reading.

Spiritual reading should always be slow and meditative. When something strikes us, we should pause and sit with the word that is speaking to our soul. As we grow spiritually, we will find that a few verses of Scripture or a paragraph in a good book will be all we need during a quiet time with the Lord.

Suggestion #5: Conclude with prayers of petition, intercession, and thanksgiving. Most likely, all of us who spend time in prayer bring up our own intentions (prayers of petition) and the intentions of others (intercessory prayers). Finally, it is always good to end our time with the Lord with a prayer of thanksgiving: “Thank you, Jesus, for this time of prayer. Help me to keep a sense of your presence through the rest of this day.”

Persevering in prayer. Perseverance is a virtue we all need when it comes to most things, including dieting, exercising, or staying in a difficult relationship. Persevering in prayer is also a challenge, especially when we think it is a waste of time, or when we feel God

is not answering our prayer. We can be certain that the devil's agenda is always to get us to quit whatever it is that will help us to become better. It is easy enough to be persuaded that we could use our time better than sitting with the Lord. What we need is to be strongly convinced of the value of *wasting time with the Lord*.

STRANGE BUT TRUE

John Adams was a close friend of Thomas Jefferson. After Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, John Adams led the fight in Congress for its adoption. They were among its signers on July 4, 1776. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson both died on the same day July 4, 1826—exactly 50 years after the Declaration was signed!

Morning Prayer

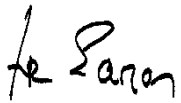
I thank you, Lord, for the wonder of my being,
for giving me another day to love and serve you,
and enjoy the awesome beauty of your creation.

May I often think of you during this day.

Inspire everything that I say and do.

May it all begin from you and with your
unfailing help, be carried through for your glory,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Le Sarah". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.