4 July 2021 Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
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Jesu Juva

"Good Thorns?"
Text: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10; Mark 6:1-13

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

It was time to give the apostle Paul a gift.

I like gifts. You probably like gifts. I'm sure Paul liked gifts. Especially gifts from God!

So Paul was ***caught up into the third heaven***. He actually doesn't say it was him, simply calls this person who was caught up "a man." But as we read on it becomes clear that Paul is talking about himself. He sees things too magnificent to describe. *But that was not the gift*.

Next, he says, this man was ***caught up into paradise***. Scholars have spilled a lot of ink about whether that's the same thing as the third heaven or something different, and opinions are mixed. And Paul ***heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter***. Things that defy explanation; things for which there are no words. *But that was not the gift*.

And then, Paul says, because he had seen and heard these things, ***whether in the body or out of the body***, he doesn't know . . . but so that no one will think more of Paul than he deserves, and so that Paul himself will not become too elated or puffed up, **the Lord gives him his gift** - ***a thorn in the flesh***.

It sounds like he's still there when he gets his gift - in the third heaven, in paradise, seeing and hearing things too great for words. And compared to these things, ***a thorn in the flesh***? Not much of a gift! So, uh . . . no thank you, God. Please take it away, take it back. ***Three times***, Paul says, he asked that. Pleaded with God. Tried to return this gift. But then it was the Lord's turn to say no. <u>No</u> to Paul's request. Paul needs this gift from God.

So in just a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, Paul goes from the heights of these glorious revelations to the depths of having a ***messenger of satan*** - literally, *an angel of satan* - to harass him. A lot of ink has been spilled about that, too - what exactly Paul meant by that; what that ***thorn in the flesh*** was. But that's not really the point. The point is what the Lord tells Paul next: My gift to you wasn't a mistake and I'm not taking it back. ***My grace***, My gift, ***is sufficient for you***. That is, it is of service to you. It is good for you. **Your weakness is My power**.

Now, why was Paul telling the Corinthians all this? Because there were some people who

had come to the Corinthians and were preaching a different Gospel. And they were claiming to be apostles - and not just apostles, but super apostles! Above Peter and Paul and the others. For look at them! Peter and Paul and the others. Poor, despised, lowly, harassed, being martyred. Clearly God is not with them as He is with us. God takes care of His own.

And that is certainly true - God does take care of His own. But what does that mean? What does that look like? Maybe not what you think . . . Maybe it looks quite different than worldly success, worldly power . . . When God takes care of His own, maybe it looks like . . . **a cross**.

For in describing his own situation, his revelation and then his gift, his thorn in the flesh, what happened to Paul sounds a lot like what happened to Jesus Himself. The very Son of God in the heights of the heavens, at the Father's right hand, who then came down, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. God's greatest gift to us, come not in worldly glory, but poor, despised, and lowly. He was harassed - and not by a messenger, or angel, of satan, *but by satan himself*. Tempted in the wilderness. Tormented on the cross. And harassed not just by satan, but, as we heard today, by the people in His own hometown, who ***took offense at Him***; who rejected Him; who said *no thank you* to this gift of God.

But in this weakness was the power of God, the salvation of God. Here in this poor, lowly body - who was laid in a manger, who had to flee from King Herod, who had no place to lay His head, who got tired and hungry and thirsty - was the one who took on sin, death, and the devil, and won.

A 17th century Lutheran pastor in Poland named Valerius Herberger had an interesting thing to say about all this. He was writing on the patriarch Jacob, and specifically when his son Joseph was taken away from him by his brothers - who first wanted to kill him, but settled for selling him into slavery. They dipped the special coat of many colors his father had given him in blood and told the old man that a wild beast had gotten him. And so, understandably, Jacob was heart-broken and would not be consoled. And then *22 years later*, after 22 years of mourning, Jacob found out that Joseph was alive, and not just alive, but was the vice president of Egypt and the famine czar, who was keeping that whole region alive during a severe seven-year famine by supplying food that he had stored up.

So here's the interesting thing Pastor Herberger said: *"Jacob thought for twenty-two years that he was crying [and mourning] because of a great adversity. Now the outcome showed that he had unwittingly wept for his own prosperity."* Because now, because of what happened to Joseph, not only did they have food, but they were also given land in Egypt and were well cared for the rest of Jacob's life. *Jacob unwittingly wept for his own prosperity*.

Now, perhaps we could use Pastor Herberger's insight here, and apply it to these other situations . . .

Paul thought his gift from God was a great adversity that he didn't want. But the outcome

showed that he was unwittingly rejecting his own prosperity.

The disciples thought for three days that they were weeping over the death of Jesus as a great adversity. But the outcome showed that they had unwittingly wept for their own prosperity.

Would Paul have been Paul without his thorn in the flesh? By his own testimony he said: ***when I am weak, then I am strong***. So it would follow then, that *when he was strong, he was really weak*. So without this thorn . . . would he have messed everything up? Would he have relied on his own wisdom and srength? When he did that, he persecuted the church instead of planting it.

And, of course, Jesus would not have been Jesus without the cross. And without the death of Jesus, of course, we would be poorer. Maybe not in this world, if we could do whatever we want and enrich ourselves however we want. But when we die, then we would have nothing. So are there some now rejoicing in their prosperity, and yet unwittingly rejoicing in their poverty? Are there some now rejoicing in their life, and yet unwittingly rejoicing in their death?

And what about you? What have you prayed for that maybe God *didn't* do for you? Healing? To overcome some obstacle? For a particular gift? But so far, at least, like with Paul, the answer has been no. A big fat no.

We don't like no. We think God doesn't like us when He says no. We think there's something wrong with us when God says no.

Paul had to learn that the gifts God gives are always good, and He always uses them for good, whether they seem good to us or not. Even when they seem to us like socks under the Christmas tree rather than the new phone or video game we really wanted. And Paul did learn. So later, when he and Silas are in chains in prison, they are singing hymns and praising God (Acts 16:25) - which terribly confuses the jailer! And Paul would also write that *I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content* (Philippians 4:11).

Now all this is not to say we should do nothing; just accept whatever comes along. Not at all. The gifts of God also include the vocations He has given you, for you to do good for others, and the people in other vocations He has provided for you, to do you good. Paul sang hymns and praised God while in prison, but he also appealed to Caesar for justice. But he learned not to limit his joy and faith to only those times when things worked how he wanted them to, or according to how he thought. He came to understand that the gifts of God are much bigger than that and might look quite different than he or anyone else thought.

And today, too. The Christian life may not be what we think or imagine or are told.

For today is Independence Day, and many Christians think that just as our country grew and

gained its independence, so also Christians should grow in faith and become independent, or less dependent on God - *when the truth is exactly the opposite*. To grow in faith is *to grow more and more dependent* on God, **to rely His Word and promises, and gifts**. It is *to grow more and more* in repentance **and to rely on His forgiveness**. It is *to grow more and more* in the knowledge of our own weakness and inability, **and rely on His strength**. It is *to grow more and more* aware of all that we do not know, **and rely on His mercy**. The God who, as we prayed in the Collect today, whose *almighty power is made known chiefly in showing mercy*.

So what are the gifts God has given you? Maybe some we know, maybe some we don't, maybe some, like Paul, we don't think are gifts at all! So Paul says *rejoice always* and *give thanks in all circumstances* (1 Thessalonians 5:16, 18). For that is what faith does. Faith in our gift-giving God.

And then also come and receive the gifts that we know are gifts - the gifts our Saviour has put here for us in water, words, and bread and wine; the gifts that flow from the cross: the gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. The gifts Jesus sent His apostles out to give, and that He is still giving now through His church and His pastors. Gifts that seem poor but are really rich. Gifts that seem weak but are really strong. Gifts that can give what no other gifts can give - *Jesus Himself*.

And that's the gift that will never stop being given. For even when we are cast down into the dust of death - we will, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye - be raised up to life again. And not just life, but eternal life. Life with no more tears, death, or sadness. And no confusion. Everything made clear. That all that God did, all that our Lord gave, really was good, and worked good for us.

Even if you thought they were thorns in your flesh.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.