

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH
SERMON FOR THE SEVENTH DAY AFTER PENTECOST – JULY 7, 2024
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Good morning!

Thorns.

I am sure you have had enough experiences getting pricked by a thorn or getting a splinter in your finger as have I - doing yardwork or whilst dealing with wood.

Thorns are something that no one else would be able to see but the bearer knows full well where they are and how they are hurting them as they create constant, throbbing pain. This is what makes the thorn's existence undeniable to the bearer of it.

Apostle Paul had a 'thorn.' I think we all know that it was no literal thorn but a metaphorical one. Paul is rather discreet about, not sharing outright what it is. He described it as being a torment and a weakness - something that kept him from "being too elated," and of the Devil. Some have speculated this 'thorn' to be epilepsy, others homosexual desires. It could have been a stutter; In the Apocrypha, Paul was described as "unimpressive [in person]" and that "his speech amount[ed] to nothing." This 'thorn' may have been a flaw in his character, or even a personal issue that kept bringing Paul down.

In any case, I think this thorn would have been something that would have made Paul say to himself, "If it weren't for this, I would think more clearly; and would do ministry better!" This thorn was an obvious hindrance.

The bearer of a thorn will continue to feel the pain - until it's pulled out. Thorns are often so small that you need someone else's help to remove them. Paul asked the Lord to remove his thorn. But did He? No! Our Lord, who is known to heal and to be compassionate to those who are suffering, intentionally left this thorn in Paul's flesh.

In keeping the thorn in, Our Lord wished for Paul to meditate on its use: Which was to keep Paul humble and to exalt *the Lord's power* in Paul's life. Because Paul is of impeccable pedigree - "a Pharisee of the Pharisees" and well-versed, he could have ministered from his own strengths and never realized *when or how* God's strength came through. This 'thorn' kept Paul from being 100% reliant on himself.

I have a thorn in the flesh as well; in fact, I have a few.

One thing I will share with you is that I always had social- and performance anxiety, which made public speaking - or any kind of speaking - very difficult for me. When I was in college and was invited to do street-evangelism, I was miserable; I could not strike up a conversation with strangers and gained not one soul. Never did I think I would do any kind of Christian ministry ever.

Knowing this about myself, I was in utter awe when - and this is over a decade later - God gave me the right words to speak to my patients and their families while I was a chaplain intern at Mount Sinai Hospital in my birth town Chicago. I also noted that I had pastoral authority to my patients and a never-before-felt confidence in the call to chaplaincy. Undeniably, the power of ministry I experienced did not originate from me - it was all God.

Perhaps you have sensed God's beckoning call to ministry but have been hesitant because of what you consider to be a flaw in yourself. Perhaps you have performance anxiety like me, or personal issues you have tried to work out but have not completely 'conquered.' Maybe, like Paul, you have been praying for its removal and have been postponing joining a ministry until you thought you had all your issues worked out.

Whatever embarrassing or humiliating issue you may have, I want to invite you to focus less on what the Enemy is trying to tell you about it and more on what God says about it – and you.

Our readings today inform us that God does not fancy the mighty & able; the glib & good-looking; the trained & competent. While there is a place for training and good education, which I am not negating, God embraces those who think they have flaws and know that they fall short of the glory of God. And, He invites these humble people to join His redemptive work in this world. Read the beginning of the Gospel of Mark: Jesus called fishermen! See in Acts, how Jesus calls Saul, a persecutor of Christians, who is the author of today's Epistles (Paul).

And look what they did!

Even without pre-approved tracts or copies of the Sermon on the Mount, or training in public speaking, or the essentials for travel and basic self-care, Jesus' disciples did great deeds - equal to what Jesus Himself had been doing - calling people to repentance, healing the sick, and casting demons out! How? Because Jesus provided for their daily needs, the boldness to speak, and *gave* them authority over the unclean spirits and to heal.

We believers of Christ are all called to the Royal Priesthood.

Do you have thorns? OK.

Do these thorns humble you? Good.

Acknowledging that we don't have what it takes to do His work is an important step to a healthy and desirable dependence on God, which He is looking for in His workers. So, embrace your thorns!

Once we can embrace our 'thorns,' we can also endure insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities - because we'll know that these are opportunities for God's power to come through.

For whenever we are weak, then we are strong.

When God calls you, He will give you sufficient grace.

He will empower you.

He will provide - what you need - to do His work.

All we need to do is to humble ourselves, lean on God, and be there to say 'yes.'

And, I can't wait to witness God's Power come through our lives because this world, which God loves, so desperately needs it.