



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Of Thorns and Crowns

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Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness. So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me (2 Corinthians 12:7-9).

For our annual spring retreat at Jumonville or Laurelville, we’ve welcomed someone we whimsically call our “guest speaker.” What that means is, I read one or more books by somebody who says wise things well, and then I share that person’s insights for us to reflect upon over the course of the retreat.

There are advantages to doing it that way. For one thing, it’s a lot cheaper to read books and offer the author’s thoughts than to try to get on their busy schedule and pay travel costs and speaker’s fees. Another advantage is that the speaker doesn’t actually need to be alive, which widens the pool of potential guests. Sometimes we don’t even know the speaker’s name, but we don’t really need to know, if they have good things to say. So in recent years we’ve heard from the anonymous fourteenth century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and Thomas Merton, and Henri Nouwen, whom I knew at Yale, in addition to such living lights as Richard Rohr and Archbishop Tutu of South Africa.

This year at Jumonville, we learned a lot from Parker Palmer, a Quaker who is still very much alive, through his reflections on finding our “true self” in his little book called

Let Your Life Speak. Parker was so well received that, when I finished his newest book last week, I decided to invite him to be our guest speaker in church this morning.

The new book is called *On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity & Getting Old.* Parker Palmer will be 80 this year, so he's sharing insights that come with aging, but his gleanings are relevant to anyone who's paying attention to the way we live in this world. And of course, it doesn't matter how old you are if you're not paying attention anyway.

The book is timely this morning, too, because a theme in our scriptures has to do with the problems that plague us—the “thorns” in our side, as St. Paul calls that mysterious thing that troubled him so much and he never quite managed to shake.

Three times in his life, Parker Palmer lived through periods of deep depression, which means he has some credibility when it comes to addressing the hardest things we ever have to face. Having gone through a number of unhelpful counselors, and felt the futility of well-meaning but useless advice from religious friends, of the sort that the book of Job warns us about, Parker found a therapist who asked a question that helped to turn his life around. The therapist said, “You seem to look upon depression as the hand of an enemy trying to crush you. Do you think you could see it instead as the hand of a friend, pressing you down to ground on which it is safe to stand?”

St. Paul's experience seems to have been just like that. Three times he asked the Lord to remove some thorn from his soul, but instead of taking the trouble away, God gave him solid ground to stand upon. The word that came to him was: “My grace is sufficient for you....” The grace of

God in Christ is the only solid ground there is, because God alone is the ground of our being. “On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand,” as the old hymn says. Hence the first word in the subtitle of Parker Palmer’s book: *Grace, Gravity, and Getting Old*.

Lots of people, even many Christians, try to take their stand on whatever sandy beach they can find—family, friends, fitness, fortune or fame—until some tide of trouble rolls in and washes the ground out from under them. Then what happens?

Some people just fall apart when calamity comes. Others are willing to turn to anyone who might help, and that’s when they finally come to know the power of God—the strength most of us never find until our own weakness drives us to it.

Parker Palmer says that hearts can be broken in either of two ways: they can break apart, or they can just break open. Hearts can shatter when they grow brittle, and sometimes they scatter shrapnel like a grenade, wounding other people around them as they explode. Violence, Palmer says, is what happens when we don’t know what else to do with our suffering. On the other hand, hearts can break open instead, in ways that lead to healing. He recalls a tale from Hasidic Judaism:

A disciple asks the rebbe: “Why does Torah tell us to ‘place these words upon your hearts’? Why does it not tell us to place these holy words in our hearts?” The rebbe answers: “It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our

hearts. And there they stay until, one day, the heart breaks and the words fall in.”

Sometimes our hearts are broken by personal trials and temptations. Sometimes they’re broken by the folly and heartless vanity of the world. Palmer says, “we all live at the intersection of our small worlds and the big one around us. If we want to serve others, we must attend to both.” Some of the thorns in our soul are the afflictions of private life, individual wounds that need the touch of the Great Physician. Some of us are fairly free of wounds like those, but we see the cruelty of others, or their callous indifference to suffering and injustice, and we struggle not only with the pains of empathy but also with the temptation, as Palmer says, to bite the hook of our own anger.

Whatever the source of our struggles, many of us turn to God only after all else fails. If we can get by on anything else—especially if we think we can get by on our own wit and wisdom, our mental or material wealth—we’ll try to do that as long as we can. But all those things will fail us in the end, if only because this life itself will come to an end one day.

Palmer recalls the sixth century Rule of St. Benedict, which tells monks to “keep death daily before one’s eyes.” He says when he first read that line, it struck him as a bummer, but with the advantage of age and maturity, it makes perfect sense to him now. For one thing, an awareness that this life will end prompts us to pay close attention to what’s here right now; and when we do that, life becomes so much richer and more meaningful as long as we enjoy it. Then again, when we realize that life comes to us as a gift from God, we’re filled with gratitude and motivated to

“pay it forward” now, because we can only share a gift while we have it in hand to give away.

So the thorns in our side and the calamities of life, and even the reminder that this life will end one day, can become the kinds of gifts that press us to find the only solid ground where it’s ever safe to stand. And that ground is safe because the thorns and calamities of this world are not the last word. They all get redeemed in the end, through the great God St. Paul encountered when he was caught up in a vision of heaven that gave him strength for the rest of his life.

In what we now call Holy Week, Pontius Pilate thinks he can control Jesus because he has the power to punish him, and even put him to death. But Jesus says, “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above.” Jesus lays down his life willingly because he trusts that in death, as in life, God is good. God will provide, and soon this crown of thorns will fall away, and in its place will be a crown of glory.

Whenever we stand on the brink of anything, as Parker Palmer says, the words of another old song turn out to be true:

The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart,
a fountain ever springing!
All things are mine since I am his!
How can I keep from singing?



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