

It was probably my junior year of college, end of the first quarter, and I remember I had one late final—the last Friday of the term. Most everybody had gone home for the Christmas vacation already. I was studying late and believe it or not one of the vending machine “made an error in my favor” (the first and only time I remember). I put in my quarter and out cascaded 1, 2, 3 goodies, a dozen, maybe two dozen Three Musketeers, peanuts, Crunch bars, Hershey bars...they just kept raining down. (Now many times I’ve lost change in larcenous machines—lifetime, machines and I are probably about even—but that was one memorable occasion. (Don’t ask what I did with this bonanza. I probably did the Christlike thing: hoarded all the good stuff, that would be the chocolate bars, then took the jujubes, the good n’ plenty licorice bits, the stale crackers, the milk duds which would rip your fillings out on contact, and offered them around to my few remaining friends so they’d think I was a generous guy...))

I In our lesson this morning the apostle Paul describes something of his own recurring personal battles in life: a “thorn in the flesh.” He’d love to be rid of it; he had begged God (and three times: that is completely, fully) to take this pain, this thorn, away from him.

You can bet scholars have jumped all over this one. Was his recurring thorn physical pain or disability? Migraine headaches, or epilepsy, or malarial fever? Was it a speech impediment, or a defect in eyesight? Was it terrible eyesight? Calvin and Luther thought it referred to temptations Paul had confronted; others have conjectured it stands for the myriad persecutions Paul suffered for the gospel and for his Lord Jesus. Another idea is that refers to Paul’s physical appearance. Earlier in the letter Paul writes what his enemies keep saying: “His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak and his speech contemptible.” [10:10]

The oldest physical description of Paul survives from the late 2nd Century [The Acts of Paul and Thekla; extra-canonical]. It tells us “Paul was small in stature, bald-headed, bow-legged, a vigorous physique with adjoining eyebrows and a slightly hooked nose.” (One of the first ancient witnesses to the dreaded “unibrow” phenomenon.)

Maybe Paul had a unibrow, but we don’t know what his thorn was. We know it was painful or humiliating or both, and he wanted it to go away—a lot! Maybe we have no record of it so that we can better identify with Paul’s hardship. Paul had a thorn, and every one of us has at least one, also. Something. Where do you feel defeated, or powerless, or broken beyond repair, or perpetually embarrassed? What is the private secret you hesitate to share with God or anyone else—and sometimes you even try to kid yourself that it’s not there, or not really so bad...

We do not get to choose our thorns—we have to endure them. Is your thorn maybe a deep hope dashed? An ambition abandoned? Maybe it’s a secret addiction that has the best of you, or periodic depression. It may be loneliness. A number of you have been battling cancer. It may be a physical defect of yours, or someone in your family. It could be an unfulfilling marriage, or a marriage or family or children which have eluded you. (I like the story of the hopefulness and spunk displayed by a young woman on a cruise ship. It was mostly peopled by older patrons. A young man found himself

therefore feeling a bit out of place. Oddly, though, this young woman seemed to materialize before him in unusual spots. She even seemed to recognize him, from the familiar look in her eye. He felt a bit strange, and finally introduced himself to her, vaguely apologizing for not knowing who in the world she was. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to be staring at you—it’s just that you look so much like my first husband.” He didn’t know what to say. He stammered out a lame condolence about her loss, then asked hesitantly what had happened to her first husband.” “Oh,” she replied cheerfully, “I haven’t been married...yet.”)

One of my thorns was for a long time an innate sense of expecting the worst, of feeling inadequate, unconfident. A fairly common thorn. (During finals in college I’d have dreams that I got lost getting to class; that I’d overslept and sprinted to arrive at 11:45 for a 9:00 to noon final. What an imaginative subconscious!) When I began seminary, however, after lying dormant for ten years the same doubts came back. (In this dream I would be sitting in the pew, worshiping with Trish, and the preacher would look at me, no warning at all, and say, “And now Chip will come forward to preach this morning.” My dreams kept kicking me right in the fears. And what if I told all the stories I knew in the first month of preaching? Who ever heard of a pastor resigning after one month...”)

Eventually I asked God to take the fears away, so I could make some progress in peace. This did not happen, at least not nearly as quickly as I would have liked. So I guess I decided to let God figure it out. “If You want me to be a pastor, You’re going to have to deal with all this fear and anxiety. We’re partners now.” (Even now, some of my fears are so ingrained it’s hard to visualize exactly what the result would be did I not harbor them.)

We all have our thorns to deal with. Mine was nothing like Paul’s: here is this giant of the faith, but a very passionate, very flawed man. “Hey God, how ‘bout a little help down here! I’m doing my best, risking my life, traveling the world, getting beat up and whipped and stoned nearly to death and jailed and shipwrecked right and left—and still I have this thorn. Why won’t you give me a break and take it away!”

God is silent. The thorn stays. Imagine Paul’s frustration!

And when finally God speaks, His response is totally unexpected: “Paul, my incomparable ambassador, I hear your cries. And I have an answer for you. It’s not going to be merely thorn removal or thorn management. It’s better than that, stronger than that. It’s called grace. “My grace is sufficient for you, because My power is made perfect in your weakness.” [v 8] “I understand about your pain: My Son Jesus knows all about that, firsthand. But I promise you I will keep extending you My grace: that is, a sense of My presence, My power, My forgiveness, My abiding love for you. So whatever you have to face, and however frightening or painful, You will have what you need. You may know that I am with you. My grace is all you need.”

We may think of “grace” as God’s forgiveness of our sin and His undeserved love. True: but grace is also the promise and the reality of God’s sustaining presence and healing love and sufficient power from one moment, one day to the next—for the rest of your life—to the end of the age, and then some.

Once Paul had encountered the risen Christ, the reality of God’s grace flooded over him and saturated him thru and thru. It was enough to keep him going strong the rest of his life. (We know the historical impact of this man whose zeal for his religion

was turned to zeal for the gospel, for new life in Christ for the world: he changed the face of the world. But it took the grace of God becoming real to him, in him, for him to get past the thorn he always struggled with.

(That 2nd Century description: I left out one thing it also said. This “smallish, bald-headed, bow-legged, vigorous man with a hooked nose and a unibrow” had become a smallish bald-headed vigorous man with a hooked nose and a unibrow and *full of grace*.”)

God promised Paul that thru his thorn, God’s grace would kick in and be sufficient. See the result: Paul became an unstoppable, inexhaustible, perpetually broken (in a good way!) grace machine: heaven on wheels! An out-of-control vending machine into whom Someone had already poured endless quarters, a lifetime supply, and more. Wherever he was led, to whomever he met—out poured the grace of God. (Hear Paul’s assurance to his beloved: “And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.” [2 Cor 9:8] I am indebted to John Ortberg for some of these insights.)

(A quick aside: none of us has mastered this; we’re all learning. Maybe you’re new to church; new to Jesus, not yet living in the grace of God. Maybe you’ve been spending your energy until now in thorn management, not grace. Trying to manhandle your fears, trying to earn God’s love with your good behavior. In any case: you are in the right place. Keep coming back to God; whether here or in some other faithful church: keep taking Jesus seriously. Keep asking Him for this life of His grace and forgiveness and presence and peace. God will answer you. Keep at it!)

II Thank God, many of you live your lives, like Paul, in the daily power of the Spirit of God abiding in you. This Presence is the most true thing about your lives. But there are corporate, church-wide dimensions of this life of grace, also.

I’d like to suggest two ways for us to keep in mind as to how churches remain grace machines, also.

1) The first is to be honest about your thorns: with yourself first, with God, and then with at least one other person. The fullness of the power of God could not work thru Paul until finally he gave up and accepted his thorn. He was honest about it, and came to see his liability as a powerful channel thru which the grace of God could empower him.

It may sound easy enough for Paul to be writing this so long ago, but it’s not so easy for us to be honest about our thorns, come out of our denial about them. For one thing, where we live we are surrounded by thorn denial experts. At casual glance, it seems everyone around us has no thorns, no difficulties. So many look healthy and shiny and fit, and think themselves self-made—the last neighbors in the world beset with fears, with pain, with failures, with private thorns.

For many people thorn management is the best they know—but not Paul, not us followers of Jesus. We know there are no people without thorns: certainly not us, first of all. We scrub up pretty good of a Sunday morning, but what “brung” us here in the first place? God’s grace is released in us, made real in our lives, when we come out of denial and confess, or remember, how we are each one of us, like Paul, people with thorns.

Christ’s Church, and you and me, this church, is the healing ward for people who have admitted we have thorns. The easiest way for us to shut down the healing,

empowering grace of God in us, is for us to forget who we are. This church is not a place for pretend, but a place where we stay real about our thorns, our fears, our brokenness, our sin. With God, of course; but with a mentor, in our small group, on our retreats, with a friend: we show the courage to risk taking the mask off, to be real about our thorns.

Before you get much practice at it, this kind of candor—in the appropriate setting—sounds quite risky, if not somehow sinister. (I don't mean anything weird; no emotional voyeurism or exhibitionism: simple honesty in the appropriate setting.) But our personal experience keeps confirming the opposite. When you dare to be honest about your thorns with a friend, in your small group: your friend doesn't say, "You have a thorn? I can't believe you could have those thoughts, could be so imperfect. I am shocked and I can no longer be your friend." Isn't it just the opposite: "You have that thorn? As a matter of fact I have a few of my own. Let me tell you about them. And by the way, I already knew about your thorn. I know about some you haven't mentioned yet. But I love you anyway, and more, not less, now that you have trusted me."

Our small group experience bears this out. The least risky thing, when it's our turn to share, is to give a superficial update: here's how the kids are doing, here's what my schedule is like, here's my "highs and lows" since I last talked and here's where we went on our vacation and it was great—and there is less grace in the circle than there was when you began. But many of you have experienced the opposite: the grace which flows, the nearness of the Holy Spirit, when one has courage enough to be honest, to risk it: to tell the stories in which I'm not the hero, to tell where I'm not doing OK, how I need your prayers and your understanding. And so often then the circle becomes a sacred, holy place, and the bonds are only forged deeper.

(One of the surprisingly few places the word "grace" is used in the NT outside of Paul occurs when Jesus is described as the One "full of grace and truth." [John 1:16] Even then, in the living Word, grace and truth arrive together, co-exist together. I cannot experience the grace and power of God in my life if I will not be truthful. And truthful about my thorns. No truth, no grace. No thorns, no grace.

2) The second way churches remain "grace machines" is to keep remembering that the purpose, the very nature of God's grace is to flow out of us toward others. As it kept flowing thru Jesus, and thru Paul, and countless of the saints in our lives. Jesus came to earth in order to allow the grace of God to flow thru Him to all of us undeserving spectators. (Otherwise He could have just hung out in heaven, and saved Himself a lot of trouble!) Once by God's grace we begin to receive so abundantly, it is inevitable that God's presence and power flows out from us to others. (The light that remains hidden under a bushel basket is no light at all. Jesus' followers are good for nothing when we have forgotten His command to extend His grace to others.) [Mt 5:13-16]

Something is wrong if we think anyone can for long be a "grace consumer." In relationship to Jesus thru the Holy Spirit, we are called to become grace extenders, grace ambassadors, grace providers, grace dispensers—grace machines. If ever the power and grace of God stops with me, or in Christ's church—the church is becoming just one more club, and its days are numbered because God's grace is shut off. (It would not have been a pretty picture for me to have tried to keep consuming all the chocolate bars that kept cascading out of that broken machine. The only healthy thing for all those calories consumed would have been to fuel me to go out and get active and exercise and stay healthy—or at least to have studied with focus. But consumption without exercise leads

to flabbiness, to obesity, to disease. Physically and spiritually. So many of us receive the grace of God in so many ways, all the time. (To spend time with many of you is to be blessed, to experience grace.) For individuals, for Christ's Church: no flabbiness, no obesity!

God's grace flows thru us to others. I was just reading about Brett Favre: some of you will recognize him as one of the most effective quarterbacks in the history of the NFL, who has just completed a record-breaking year with the Green Bay Packers. (Some of you will say, "Brett Who?")

One of his thorns was that he suffered a very powerful addiction to the painkiller vicodin. He was mandated to go into rehab for it in 1996 (one of his three MVP years.) His wife threatened to divorce him in 1999 over his out-of-control drinking problem. Back to rehab. But once he admitted his thorn, and went public about his habit, he received grace to overcome the addiction.

And the grace has flowed thru him in many ways. He learned of the substance abuse problems of a talented wide receiver whose three strikes violating the NFL's substance abuse policy drove him out of the league. Favre reached out to Koren Robinson, an opponent, while he was out of football; phoned him, encouraged him, took time with him as a human being with a very painful and intractable thorn. His grace extended helped motivate Robinson, to receive the grace of God to deal with his thorn; to turn that thorn into the mighty power of God. Favre then helped intercede to get a clean and sober McMillan reinstated into the NFL; he is now a very happy and productive camper for the Packers, Favre's team. And he now sports a tattoo with Matthew 28:20 on his giant bicep—an indelible reminder to himself and whoever watches him play how the grace of God has allowed God to turn his weakness into strength; that like Paul, when he is weak, by the Spirit of God, he is strong. God's grace will never fail him.

One of the favorite pictures of Jesus for the collective grace of God, what Heaven will look like and what He expects His church to look like, is the Wedding Feast. The Master cannot stand a Wedding Feast at which there are empty seats and tables. He sends His servants—each one of us—back out to invite especially the least likely-looking prospects. (Those in denial about their thorns and the importance of the supreme invitation of the Master make other plans. Too busy, too important, too—"already-have-my-act-together, thank you." They are satisfied to keep away from the Feast, from living together in grace, but the Master sure isn't.

God wants a full house, full of anybody who will show up. To live in communion, live in grace. Live with Him. Anyone and everyone.

Churches have thorns, too. What would you say are some of ours? Too few parking spaces, that's for sure. We don't have nearly as many programs as some larger churches do: we can't be all things to all people. We come across as too liberal for conservatives and too conservative for liberals and almost nobody understand what's important to us at first. We keep ourselves a secret a little too effectively. We have room for improvement in supporting Christ's larger Church, in extending God's grace outward. Our style of worship is traditional and off-putting to many; no rock bands or praise teams, pretty subdued out there, not many teens or 20's or 30's. I'm no Rick Warren. Some of our people apparently think the church is about the right size—if they wanted a big church they'd go to Mariner's.

A rookie mistake, to think Christ's Church exists to keep me comfortable, meet my needs—but a mistake which I well understand. (I well remember: back when I lived in cold weather and before I had a family, I spent a lot of time at an indoor racketball club. I was sure happy when they offered the introductory membership special which saved me money to join. My happiness about it waned, however, once I had joined and they kept running the special, month after month, and the courts and the weight room which used to be empty got crowded, and the sauna and steam room also, and now I began hearing "I'm sorry, the towels are still in the dryer—would you mind waiting a few minutes?")

There are people in churches who say, I wouldn't want this church to become much larger. This is about the right size for me. An understandable lapse—to think Christ's church exists to meet my preference, my comfort.

We have something a lot better than chocolate bars to keep pouring thru us to others. We are grace machines, grace suppliers, grace ambassadors more than grace consumers. That's how grace works! God's grace is all we need. God's power is made perfect in our weakness.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Therefore...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.

Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Luke 14:16-23

Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.'

So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled.'