

Summer Series- Discovering God's Presence in the Tough Times

“Paul's Thorn in the Flesh- What Do I Learn from This?”

Some of you might remember Ursula Hegi's novel, *Stones from the River*. It's the story of a young girl who grows up in pre-Nazi Germany, a girl named Trudi who is born with dwarfism. Trudi is painfully aware that she is different from the other children in the village. They don't walk home with her. Many of the girls walk together as friends, but Trudi has never held anyone's hand. She wants to be like Eva, who befriends her- Eva is willowy-tall and blond.

At night, Trudi goes home and hangs by her fingertips from the doorway of her bedroom until her arms ache, trying to stretch out her short frame. And every night, she prays fervently that she would grow, and she cries herself to sleep.

It doesn't take long in life to find a reason to cry ourselves to sleep, does it? It doesn't take long to find a reason to cry out, Why, God? Why this situation? Why this tragedy? Why this illness? We live in a world where there is suffering in our bodies; suffering in our relationships, suffering that comes from injustice and from systems of oppression.

Sometimes we ask, Where are you, God, in this suffering? We might even ask, Am I being punished for some moral failure? And sometimes people ask this question- If God is all powerful and God is all loving, then why is there suffering in the world? Why wouldn't a loving God, if God had the power, get rid of the suffering? If you phrase it that way, either God isn't all loving, our God isn't all powerful. In case you stop listening before I stop speaking, let me say this right away- God doesn't use power that way. God allows freedom in this world. When we make choices that warm the planet, the hurricanes become deadlier and the droughts more intense, and the suffering that ensues is not God's fault. God allows consequences to happen. God chooses works through weakness and vulnerability. Even the collective action we take as people can look so vulnerable up against the powers.

When it comes to the question of suffering, the biblical writers spend a lot less time on the question, “Why did this happen?” and much more time on the question, “Now what?” Now that this suffering has happened, how will we respond?

I am not addressing so much today the suffering that happens when injustice is done. The history of slavery and racial segregation in our country has born the fruits of present-day racial injustice. We are reaping what we have sowed. Racial injustice can be remedied as we choose to become intentionally anti-racist in our laws and our actions and our decisions and our policies. We know God's answer through the prophets- work for justice.

But what about the suffering that comes in other ways- the breakdown of our bodies; the divisions that happen within families. The heartache that comes from bad decisions that cause irreparable harm to other people. Where is God in that suffering? Conflict and division that break apart congregations- where is God in that suffering?

In today's reading, Paul writes to the church he started in Corinth, and he is dealing with the suffering that comes from church division and conflict. And he has his own suffering to deal with. He is concerned about a group of outside missionaries that he calls super-apostles (I think facetiously). These people had visited the church in Corinth. They said they were more spiritual than Paul, the founder of the church. You should listen to our teachings, not that Paul character.

They said to the church, You know Paul isn't very impressive. He writes good letters, but he isn't very impressive in his speech when you see him in person; he's a pretty weak character compared to us. We have spiritual powers made known in ecstasies and visions.

So in towards the end of this letter, Paul takes on these missionaries. His bottom line is paradoxical- these missionaries have been claiming power, and Paul doesn't believe that God's strength is shown forth in power; God's strength is shown forth in weakness. Our weakness gives God a chance to work. At the beginning of this chapter, Paul writes, Ok, those super-apostles told you about their visions and their spiritual super-powers- let me tell you about an experience I had.

He writes in the third person, trying not to brag. "I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven- whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know- God knows." He goes on to say that in this vision he heard wonderful and amazing things that he cannot divulge.

Then he says this- “Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.” We don’t know what this thorn in the flesh was: some wonder if he had poor eyesight. You remember that he was blinded on the road to Damascus when he had a vision of Christ; maybe he was affected with vision problems the rest of his life.

Some have wondered if this thorn in the flesh was seizures, or if it was depression. Maybe he suffered from recurring bouts of malaria that caused terrible headaches. Whatever it was, he suffered mightily from it. Now, do you notice that he has a reason for this debilitating condition? His interpretation was that the evil one was allowed to give him this thorn in the flesh in order to keep his ego in check.

Maybe...but I’m going argue with Brother Paul here. I believe we are called to wrestle with Scripture. Maybe that explanation made sense to Paul, that an evil force in the world had been allowed to do him harm to teach him a lesson in humility, but I’m not sure that’s why he suffered from malaria or poor vision or depression. Life happens. Sometimes our bodies are born with challenges.

Now, can God use the challenges to create good? Of course! God loves meeting us where we’re at and using our challenges and our suffering for good. You or a loved one don’t have cancer because God decided to teach you a lesson in humility: your cells changed into something destructive. But can God teach you lessons through that suffering? Of course. Richard Rohr says that we grow the most through great love and great suffering. Suffering is the forge that can form us into more useful vessels. But I don’t believe that your suffering was *caused* by God so that you could be taught a lesson.

Paul says this: “Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me...” Now, that doesn’t mean he prayed briefly three times that he would be healed from this. It means three extended periods of prayer, he prayed, and probably fasted, and asked God to remove this thorn in the flesh.

Here’s what God said, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, (Paul says) 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.”

Paul says that God’s power is not made manifest in power, it is manifested in *weakness*. That’s Paul’s point. The goodness of God’s grace and faithfulness and creativeness can shine even more through the challenges of our lives.

I heard the story this week of a woman named Sandy Goldberg. When she was born, one of her eyes was so far turned in that you couldn’t see the color the eye. People with two working eyes can see the world in 3-D. But the world was flat to her. When she was little, she would run into parked cars on her bike. She would pour milk out on the table.

She went to a camp for visually impaired kids and fell in love with art. Paintings and drawings fascinated her because they were created to be flat, and they felt more comfortable to her than the rest of the world. She began to go to the library and check out books on art.

She lived outside of New York City, and one day she visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and saw a Vincent Van Gogh painting that rocked her world. Remember, she was perceiving art through a tunnel in her one good eye.

Here’s what’s crazy- she has become a writer and producer of audio guides for art museums (you know those audio guides that tell you what you’re looking at in the museum?) She has a disability in her vision- and she is creating guides for looking at paintings. We are talking major art museums- The Guggenheim, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Van Gogh Museum in the Netherlands. And when she created these audio guides, she didn’t tell the museums she had a disability. The curator in the Van Gogh Museum just found out that she has this eye condition- she had no idea! When the reporter asked her about Sandy’s audio guides, she said, Sandy picked out the details of color that stood out to her, and I thought, You really noticed, you really picked out the right thing. Goldberg said she didn’t want to tell anybody in these museums about her eye condition because they might see her as having a disability. How could she tell them what to look for if they thought she couldn’t see it herself?

She finally decided to finally tell people about her “thorn in the flesh” when this pandemic came about, with everybody online and complaining about the flatness of the screen. People were saying, This doesn’t seem real. And she is responding, That’s how the world always looks to me. Of course it’s real.

The curator at the Van Gogh Museum said this- Sandy might have been a bit hesitant to tell us about her eye condition, because art is all about looking. That’s what we do in art. And I’m not sure if Sandy sees more; I guess she just sees it differently.

Sandy now calls her eye condition her “superpower.” What a story of God using the infirmity, the weakness, the challenge, the disability, and we all have them, to work good in this world. God’s answer to Paul was, I’m not going to take away this challenge. My grace is sufficient for you. In fact, my power will be made perfect in your weakness.

No matter the reason for the suffering in our lives, we can ask the question, What now? Now that it has happened, what now? How will we respond in faith? How will God use this for good? I invite you to hold onto the promise with me that God’s grace will be sufficient, and that God’s power will be made perfect in your weakness. Amen.