# Congregational-Presbyterian Church

 **“Strength in Weakness”**

**2 Corinthians 12:7-10**

**May 31, 2020**

You and I are living in difficult times. The corona virus has impacted every area of our lives, relationally, financially, mentally, spiritually. It is a big problem and it doesn’t sound like we will be able to defeat it any time soon. In our biblical text this morning from Second Corinthians we learn that the apostle Paul is dealing with a problem of his own, not a universal health crisis but something he calls “a thorn in my flesh.” I invite you to turn with me to 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

To keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud. Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, “My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.” So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. That’s why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

“My grace is all you need.” That sounds pretty good when everything is right with the world. The sky is blue and the birds are singing outside your open window as you sit at your kitchen table with a cup of coffee, reading your Bible. You come across the phrase: “My grace is all you need.” That’s easy to believe when things are going well. But when things don’t go as we have planned, when the medical diagnosis is not what we hoped for, when the person we care about is drifting away from us, when the virus forces all kinds of inconveniences upon us and keeps us from being able to worship together as a congregation and to enjoy each other’s fellowship, how do we feel then about God’s statement: “My grace is all you need”?

Paul calls his particular problem “my thorn in the flesh.” Scholars have speculated about what it may have been, but we really don’t know. Whatever it was, it was with him continually and it bothered him intensely. Paul was experiencing what is true for you and me as well: in this life we will have trouble, and I want to make three brief observations about life’s problems. First, they are never desired. Paul didn’t want his thorn, and you and I do not want the problems that come our way. I have yet to hear anyone claim that they want to be infected by COVID-19. Second, problems are never convenient. They hold us back, interfering with whatever we had planned. Third, they are never easy or painless. Paul’s thorn tormented him. Have you ever had something like a thorn stuck in your flesh? They really hurt. So, like Paul, we all experience problems. What are we going to do about our problems?

Paul’s solution was to ask God to take his problem away. “Please, God, just get rid of it for me.” I have to admit that this is usually my solution as well. It seems best to me to have the problem go away, so I’m sure that is what would seem best to God. But what I have failed to do, what Paul failed to do, is to ask God for his solution rather than expecting him to endorse my solution. Paul begs God to remove the problem not only once, or twice, but three times. My guess is that he prayed that prayer many more than three times, but perhaps he had in mind three particular times when the thorn was especially painful. As Christians, we tend to respond to problems in one of several ways. We either do what Paul did and beg God to remove it, or we try to convince ourselves that it’s no big deal and we can handle it in our own strength, or we bury our head in the sand and ignore it, hoping it will go away. We try to convince ourselves that we are strong, we are capable, we are able to handle our problems our way, and God’s role is to approve our solution. But God, because he loves us and knows what’s best for us, offers us a solution that doesn’t eliminate the problem, or diminish the problem, or ignore the problem, but allows the problem to strengthen us.

What God had taught Paul through his many hardships, persecutions, and troubles was this: “My grace is all you need.” Notice that God spoke these words to Paul each time he prayed for God to remove his thorn. Clearly, Paul didn’t listen very well at first. “God, please remove my thorn.” “My grace is all you need.” Later, “God, please remove my thorn.” “My grace is all you need.” And so on until finally, after many efforts on Paul’s part to fix his own problems, he finally is able to say, “Now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses.” Now he is glad to admit that he is as weak as a newborn baby when it comes to fixing the problems in his life, and he is glad to tell us that God is as strong as, well, God, to give him everything he needs to deal with his problems. Somewhere along the way, Paul stopped demanding that God fix the problems of his life and started to be thankful for God’s presence as he endured them.

What Paul learned did not change the inconvenience, the undesirability, and the pain of his problems, but it did change his perspective. He saw how God’s strength moved in on his weakness, and he realized that the weaker he became in the midst of difficulty, the stronger God was making him. Let the weak say I am strong.