

Kryptonite and the Thorn in the Flesh

July 9, 2006

(Pentecost 5 - Year B)

2 Corinthians 12: 2-10

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

The Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians in his Second Letter in a rather cryptic manner.

Paul writes this:

“I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up into the third heaven.”

Now, the person who was caught up into the third heaven was Paul himself.

And what Paul meant by saying that he was caught up into the third heaven was that he had had an extra-ordinary religious experience.

Maybe it was an out of body experience,

Or a warm feeling of God's presence,

Or maybe it was a vision of some sort.

Some of us have had these religious experiences of being caught up into the third heaven:

Maybe it was on a retreat in the woods,

Or maybe it was hearing music in a beautiful worship space,

Or maybe it was a deja vu experience of some kind.

The problem with these extra-ordinary religious experiences is that they tend to make people brag and boast.

And, the church has divided and divided and divided because folks have said:

Well, unless you have experienced baptism by immersion, then you can't be one of us.

Or, unless you have been to Cursillo, then you just don't have what it takes.

Or, unless you are a born again Christian, then you can't be in our club.

Paul was aware of these temptations to boast and brag about our

religious experiences,

So Paul writes:

“Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh.”

Scholars have disagreed on what exactly Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” was. Yet, Paul was given a thorn in the side, a pain in the neck, to keep him humble and human and down to earth.

Paul was given a thorn in the flesh to remind him of his weaknesses.

Last Thursday night, Susan and I went to see the new movie: Superman Returns.

It is impossible to miss the theological metaphors in the movie.

Superman’s father says:

“You are my only son.

I am sending you to earth as a savior.”

Sound familiar?

Jesus, I mean Superman, is faster than a speeding bullet, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound.

He fights for truth and justice and is able to be anywhere in the world in the flash of an eye.

You might even say that Superman was caught up into the third heaven.

But, Superman does have one weakness.

For, there is one substance that will weaken Superman’s powers.

That substance is: kryptonite.

Kryponite is from Superman’s home planet of Krypton.

Kryptonite can make Superman weak.

Kryptonite is what keeps Superman from boasting and bragging.

I don’t think that I am giving too much of the movie away by saying that there is this a part in the movie when Superman is battling his arch enemy, Lex Luthor.

And Superman ends up with a sliver of kryptonite jabbed into his side.

As I saw Superman, the mighty man of steel, on the big screen,
With green kryptonite lodged in his flesh,
I saw Superman weak and in pain.
And I thought of the Apostle Paul's words to the Corinthians:

“Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in
the flesh.

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.”

For whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

But, that statement doesn't make any sense.
How is it that weakness can make someone strong?

When I find puzzles such as this in the Bible,
It helps me to look at the words that Paul *actually* wrote,
Because Paul wrote his epistles in the Greek language.

And the Greek word that Paul uses that we have translated as “strong” is
the same word that is used in other places in the New Testament.

But, in other places the word is translated as “possible.”

For, example, in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus says:

“For [human beings] it is impossible, but not for God; for [with] God all
things are possible.”¹

So, if I replace the word “strong” with the word “possible,”

Then Paul is not only saying:

For whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Paul is also saying:

For whenever I am weak, then I am possible.

Superman is able to fly around and bounce bullets off of his chest.
But, when Superman has a piece of kryptonite stuck in his flesh,

¹ See Mark 10: 27

Then, he is able to go from weakness to strength, from death to resurrection.

For when it looks like Superman is down for the count, then all things are possible.

And, the same can be said of the Apostle Paul.

Paul might have had extra-ordinary religious experiences and visions.

But, it was the thorn in his flesh that made him able to go from weakness to strength, from death to resurrection.

For when it looks like Paul is down for the count, then all things are possible.

And, the same can be said of Jesus.

Jesus is the Son of God, the great teacher and worker of miracles.

But, it was the nails in his hands that made him able to rise from weakness to strength, from death to resurrection,

For when it looks like Jesus is down for the count, then all things are possible.

And, the same can be said about *us*.

We can have a wonderful life, full of joy and happiness.

But, it is our pain, it is our grief, it is our humble humanness that makes us able to grow from weakness to strength, from death to resurrection.

For when it looks like *we* are down for the count, then all things are possible.

One of the humble privileges of being a parish priest is that people invite you into their lives in very transparent ways.

Some times I have the opportunity to hear about your amazing religious experiences, about how you might have been caught up into the third heaven.

But, what I find even more powerful is that I am able, every single day, to see and hear your pain, your grief, your struggles.

In the words of Paul, I see your “weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities.”

And, in the words of Jeff Fisher, I see your struggle with your
kryptonite.

I see your struggles with addictions, anger and unfulfilled dreams.

Yet, I also see that when you are weak, then you are strong.

I see that when you are down, *then* there is power and possibility.

A friend of mine always says:

“What doesn’t kill us, makes us stronger.”

And, I would say that Jesus and St. Paul would take that one step further
and say:

“What *does* kill us, makes us stronger.”

What is killing you?

What is your kryptonite?

What is the thorn that has been given in your flesh?

For, *those* are the things that we are able to boast about, as Paul writes:

“I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of
Christ may dwell in me.”

My friends, don’t worry if you have never had some mind-blowing
religious experience, if you have never been caught up into the
third heaven.

For, it is through your weaknesses, your pain, your struggles, that your
humble humanity is resurrected and made holy.

The puzzling experience of suffering grows us into holy people.

For when we are weak,

Then we are strong.

For when we are weak,

Then, with God, all things are possible.

AMEN.

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