

## FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

**July 8, 2018, The Seventh Sunday After Pentecost/The Fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time**

Psalm 48, II Corinthians 12:2-10

### GRACE

Intro to NT Reading

This morning's New Testament Lesson is II Corinthians 12:2-10, found on page 185 on your Pew Bibles. This passage is part of what is known by scholars as Paul's "fool's speech." (II Cor. 11:1-12:13) It begins in Chapter 11:1 with Paul's words "I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness." Paul is arguing in this speech against people he calls "super apostles," (II Cor. 11:5, 12:11) who are leading the Corinthian church away from the gospel of Jesus Christ. For a chapter and a half we hear Paul argue against them. There isn't much known about these "super apostles" except that they were rival missionaries to Paul, with a false gospel. Based on what Paul writes: they made eloquent speeches, boasted of revelations and visions they'd had, and they had entered into some payment plan with the Corinthian church and were being paid for what they were doing by the church. (p. 207.1.6)

So Paul writes to the church to call them back to the true faith. He lists the ways he has been a faithful follower of Jesus, and at the end of the speech he hints that he too has had visions, but his strength is in Jesus, not his own power as an apostle. Listen for the word of God.

Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3, Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Prophets 3-16)*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009, p.206-211

I spent most of my growing up years in Vancouver, Washington, along the Columbia River. About an hour from our house, crossing the river between Oregon and Washington was the Bonneville Hydroelectric Dam. When we would go up the river for picnics, we would often stop at the dam to watch the boats go through the lock, rising up or sinking down about 80 feet. Then we would watch the fish jump up the fish ladders that were installed for all the salmon that go up and down the Columbia River.

The fish ladders allow the spawning salmon to continue up the river to its many tributaries. Water flows over the stair-stepped ladders or steps, so the fish are fighting against the river current, and fighting up the elevation in the river caused by the dam.

When I was in Jr. High, Bonneville Dam built viewing windows beside the fish ladders so we could watch, from under water, as the salmon fought their way against the current up each elevation of the steps.

You could also watch from outside, as the salmon would leap into the air, rising up each elevation of the gradual steps or ladder.

It was a mighty struggle that each fish was making against the current and the raised elevation of the river. If you've ever visited Bonneville Dam then you have heard people actually cheering out loud for the fish as they fight their way upstream.

It is a mighty struggle that you get to witness very close to the action.

For some reason as I spent time with Paul's second letter to the Corinthians this week I was reminded of those struggling salmon fighting against mighty odds and currents to go up river.

I was reminded of them for two reasons. First Paul was in a time of struggle with the young Christian church in Corinth. He was struggling against the currents caused by the super apostles and their false gospel.

But maybe even more than that he was struggling against what he named as the “thorn in his flesh that tormented him.” This is where we get the phrase in English about someone being a “thorn in my side.”

There is no place in the Bible where Paul goes into detail about what this thorn might have been. Scholars have argued for it being a physical ailment, or something psychological, or spiritual, or possibly opposition from others in Corinth. (p. 109.1.9)

What’s most important for us isn’t really what the thorn in his side was, but how he dealt with it. Paul writes that three times he begged God to remove it from him. But instead God told him: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (II Cor. 12:9)

Instead of fighting against this thorn in his side Paul writes this: “So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me...for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. (vv. 9b-10)

In the midst of the struggle Paul learned, through God speaking to him, that being strong and mighty wasn’t the way to survive the struggle of life and faith. Paul was called to know his weakness in the situation, so he could rely on God’s strength and presence through grace.

God’s ways often go against our first instinct. Isn’t our first instinct to fight back against the challenges that come into life, or the people that challenge our lives?

We too know pushing against currents and rising elevations.

Who would choose weakness over strength, or weakness over power?

And yet that is the lesson that God taught Paul, as Paul fought for the soul of the congregation in Corinth, and tried to live as a faithful follower of Jesus.

And it is the lesson Paul passes on to us this morning from God:

God says to us: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

We are called to learn to say with Paul: “So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so the power of Christ may dwell in me...for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

Instead of relying on our own strength, ingenuity or power, the life of faith invites us to rely on God’s strength first.

Instead of fighting with the fierceness of Columbia River salmon, God called Paul, and calls us to relax into grace first.

We are called to trust that God’s strength and power are enough.

This is the other reason I thought of the salmon, because their fierce battle stands in contrast to the resting into grace. This resting into grace is beautifully captured in the powerful poem called The Avowal, by Denise Levertov.

You will find this poem your bulletins on the yellow insert. I heard this poem three years ago at Ghost Ranch.

It has been with me ever since, reminding me to rest into grace instead of fighting with my own plans, assumed wisdom and faulty strength.

Listen to these amazing words:

## The Avowal

As swimmers dare  
to lie face to the sky  
and water bears them,  
as hawks rest upon air  
and air sustains them,  
so would I learn to attain  
free fall, and float  
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,  
knowing no effort earns  
that all-surrounding grace.

Denise Levertov (1923–1997)

The gift and promise of grace is that it isn't earned. When we are in the midst of struggles, with thorns in our sides, and opposition from those who stand against God, and the struggles of strong currents and rising elevations, grace will find us.

Grace is a free gift, given in love to each of us. In Levertov's words it is "all-surrounding."

It holds the promise that we can trust, that even in our weakest moments, God's love and power will be with us, and will be enough.

The most amazing thing about grace is that we can't earn it,  
we can't be good enough  
or creative enough  
or wise enough for God's love to enter our lives.

The promise of God's loving grace is that it is freely given to each of us in Jesus.

Opponents will come,  
strong currents and rising elevations will come,  
deep loss and sadness and grief will come  
and there will be thorns in our sides.

As followers of Jesus we are called to rest into the grace that will be our strength in those times and seasons of our lives.

We are called to hold onto God's words to Paul, because they are God's words for each of us: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Or in the closing words of the book I read to the children this morning, we hear God speaking:  
If you're still my small babe  
or you're all the way grown,  
my promise to you  
is you're never alone.  
You are my angel, my darling,  
my star...and my love will find you,  
wherever you are.

Tillman, Nancy, *Wherever You are, my love will find you*, New York: Feiwel and Friends, 2010.