### “My Grace Is Sufficient” Steve Finlan for The First Church, July 7, 2024

**2 Corinthians 12:2–10**

2I 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. 3And I know that such a person . . . 4was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. . . 6 I refrain from boasting, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, 7even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore . . . a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me to keep me from being too elated. 8Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, 9but 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 . . . 10hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

**Mark 6:2–5**

2On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? . . . What deeds of power are being done by his hands! 3Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joseph and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offence at him. 4Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” 5And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.

Do you ever say “I know someone who . . .” and then relate something that you actually experienced? It might be a way of trying not to brag, or trying not to make yourself the center of attention. Or it might be a clever strategy to *seem* to not talk about yourself, when, in fact, everybody is going to realize that you *are* talking about yourself.

Paul speaks of someone who was caught up to the third heaven and saw and heard things not to be retold. It becomes clear that the “someone” is himself, since he says he will not boast about it, but will boast in his weaknesses instead (2 Cor 12:9). But he is letting people know he experienced something extraordinary, since he says “even considering the exceptional character of the revelations” (2 Cor 12:7).

Now, there is a paradoxical blessing in this story, since God has given him a thorn in the flesh “to keep me from being too elated” (12:7). However, he is not going to be healed in this lifetime. Instead he gets a special message, “my grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). The lesson he learns from this is that, in Christ, “whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (12:10).

This is an essential part of what Paul learns, and what he teaches. He is always going against the common opinion. The common view is that strength and power are to be desired, while vulnerability and weakness are to be despised; and those who show those weaknesses are *shamed*. In First Corinthians, he says “God’s weakness is stronger than human strength” (1 Cor 1:25). In speaking of his first preaching to the Corinthians, he says “I came to you in weakness” (2:3). While comparing the church to a body, he says “the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and . . . our less respectable members are treated with greater respect” (12:22–23). He is always ready to bring a new perspective on the whole weakness/strength dichotomy.

He sees Jesus as being powerful when he made himself vulnerable, writing “For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God” (2 Cor 13:4). If you’re going to read Paul, get used to this way of perceiving strength where others perceive weakness. Because of his reliance on Jesus, he could write “whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:10).

He also makes some concessions to the common way seeing things. People tend to have high respect for someone who has had a genuine vision, and Paul lets the reader know, in a roundabout way, that he has had a vision of the third heaven. So, in case they are still thinking in that way, they will have reason to listen respectfully to Paul.

But what is most prominent is that Paul has learned to be content with God’s grace, and with *not* being healed from his affliction. His life becomes a testimony to spiritual grace rather than to physical healing. Paul does mention miracles and does believe in the supernatural power of God, but that is not where the emphasis lies. Rather, it lies in the dramatic reversals and surprising result of God’s saving acts. Even “my grace is sufficient for you” is a surprising thing, where God asks Paul to hang in there with faith despite not getting the healing he wants.

We, also, often have to rely on the spiritual grace of God, without getting what we most want, whether a better job, relief from a chronic physical condition, or a better relationship with one’s children. We, too, often learn that we won’t get the healing or vindication or repair that we seek, but we will get God’s grace, which is a *spiritual* blessing. Sometimes, if we wait long enough, we *do* get an answer to our prayer, though possibly in a form we did not expect, and sometimes the answer is even better than we could have imagined. This, hopefully, will teach us to trust and wait with patience. If we discern the spiritual value we are *meant* to discern, then we learn to say, “God answers every prayer, but in *God’s* time and in *God’s* way.” And with the psalmist, we say “my times are in your hand” (Ps 31:15). That’s a great act of faith, if we can trust God to do things in God’s time.

And it certainly would show more faith than was shown by the citizens of Nazareth who, in the gospel story, grumble, in effect, “how can he say and do these things? How can he be anything special? We know him, his mother, his brothers and sisters. They’re just our neighbors. Nothing special.” Their skepticism, their denigrating, their failure to recognize excellence are discouraging, and lead Jesus to observe, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house” (Mark 6:4). You might get respect from everybody but your neighbors, and maybe even your own family. This is a common experience for people who excel, the Einsteins, the Brahmses, and the Tolkiens: sometimes sneered at by contemporaries, but revered by more perceptive people and by those in later times. Further, Jesus’ remark indicates that people will recognize the geniuses from other countries.

Because of the unbelief of the Nazarenes, Jesus was unable to perform many healings there. Only a few sick people had enough faith to be healed. So the lack of healings there was for a completely different reason from Paul not being healed. Paul stood as an example of someone who could thrive on spiritual blessings without a physical healing. The Nazarenes didn’t thrive, didn’t have joy, and weren’t healed. I am reminded of the grumpy older brother in the prodigal son story, who “became angry and refused to go in” to the party, who had no joy (Luke 15:28).

Those who experience salvation have joy. Let us not choose to be disgruntled and self-pitying, when joy can be our lot. Paul had joy, and Jesus’ grace really was sufficient for him.

Joy makes me think of Mark Fidrych, a country boy from Worcester, Mass., who became a great pitcher for one season, going 19-9 in 1976. He was famous for manicuring the mound, talking to the ball, and going around the infield shaking fielders’ hands after they made plays. He immediately became a fan favorite around the country. I saw him pitch a 10-inning complete game that he lost to the Oakland A’s 2-1. Then, in 1977, he suffered a torn rotator cuff, in the time before they knew what a rotator cuff injury was.

He tried to make comebacks for years after that, and still managed to win some games, but lost as many as he won, and couldn’t pitch many innings. But he never complained about his injury. He was always joyous, uplifted everybody else’s spirits, and was grateful to have had a major league career. He got to marry the love of his life, and had a daughter. He suffered an accident while repairing his truck in 2009 and died. Millions of people still remember him fondly.

May we be open to living in the present and experiencing the joy of living. In our case, our joy comes from knowing that God is love and God invites us into his everlasting family. Joy also comes if we accept that God will do all good things in time, and that, in the end “he will wipe every tear from their eyes” (Rev 21:4). Your assignment now is to go forth in joy.