

Text: II Corinthians 12: 1-10

Title: Super Spiritual

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In 1977 at a small public high school in Orange City, Iowa there was a revival. Renee ~ a good friend and great student ~ started a Bible study and prayer group. Soon a whole host of my classmates were reading scripture, talking about spiritual things, and worrying about the eternal destiny of my soul. Turns out that I had more questions than clarity and given my doubts they were sure that I was in peril. But, for a few months the fervent spirit of revival swept across the rolling hills of northwest Iowa.

Renee was super spiritual.

She saw God's hand in everything that happened. She seemed personally tapped into what God was doing. Language about God slipped effortlessly into everything she said. Forty-one years later I still remember the vision that she described about a bird landing on a wire and causing the other birds to flutter about. Some of the birds flew away while others settled back on the wire. I don't remember what she claimed it meant but I remember her certainty that it came from God. Forty-one years later I still remember her thanking God for a particular parking spot in downtown Orange City. At seventeen I could imagine the hand of God intervening for parking in Chicago, but downtown Orange City is two blocks long, with free parking....

Renee went on to Oral Roberts University, stayed in Oklahoma, got married and is a mother and grandmother. When I saw her at a reunion last year she asked, with the same delightful spirit, what God was doing in my life. It still seemed to come so easy for her.

Maybe you have super spiritual friends.

Maybe you know someone who seems to have their finger on God's pulse.

Maybe you've met someone who's life and language are laced with a God consciousness.

Maybe you know the same.

Maybe you find your spirit in sync with God's.

I'm not doubting or disparaging Renee's experience. There are all sorts of divine-human relationships. I know her desire to please God is authentic. I know that she trusts what she trusts. I've spent the better part of the past forty-one years wishing that I had her spiritual DNA. A little bit like that scene in *When Harry Met Sally*, "I'll have what she's having." I've long wished that I wasn't so conflicted and that faith came easier.

Dear friends, in this morning's text Paul is responding to the super spiritual.

A group of Jewish-Christian missionaries visited Corinth after Paul and claimed to have a special connection or "easy-line" to God. Paul refers to them as "super apostles." They criticized Paul and claimed to have more spiritual power than he'd ever dreamed of. And, they won over a following in Corinth....

It is hard not to be swayed by the super spiritual. In a world that is often murky-gray something in us wants things that are black and white and sure. And, when we feel powerless it is hard not to be attracted to power.

So, Paul writes to the Corinthians to defend his credentials, his teaching, and his Lord. Our text is part of a couple chapters of this defense. We pick up where Paul references an extraordinary spiritual experience: being “caught up in the third heaven.”

There’s all sorts of scholarly speculation about what that means or where it’s located. A third heaven suggests that there would be heavens one and two. According to Islamic tradition when Muhammad ascended to heaven the angel Gabriel admitted him to the third heaven. Chances are that the third heaven means the dwelling of God. Paul also refers to it as “paradise.”

And Paul is coy here. Sort of boastful not boastful. As one scholar puts it:

At first it seems he really is talking about someone else but then next thing you know, he is claiming that these “superior visions” are actually his after all. “I don’t want to brag on myself” Paul writes “but I would brag on this other guy (who is not me but kind of is me). So, I won’t brag and anyway to keep me from thinking too much of myself given these grand visions I have this thorn thing to keep me grounded and humble.”

I suspect that if any preacher came off this way in the pulpit, the Executive Committee would convene a secret meeting to see about getting the pastor some time off. Soon!

What it boils down to is this: Paul could have impressed people by telling about his spectacular trip to paradise where he was given a revelation of “inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell.” Forget about birds on a wire that sort of stuff grabs your attention.

But, Paul kept his lips sealed for 14 years. It is almost as if he’s so uneasy talking about it that he uses the third person ~ as if he were speaking of someone else. And then, rather than tell of his experience in the third heaven Paul writes about the thorn in his flesh that was given him by “a messenger of Satan.”

Now. Oceans of ink have been spilled with speculation about Paul’s thorn. Physical ailment? Mental illness? Spiritual torment or chronic temptation? Epilepsy? A vision problem? Migraines or recurring malaria? The rebuff and ridicule of others? You can find cases made for all of those maladies and more. But, whatever it was the Corinthians must have known about it, so there was no need to name it. And, whatever it was every Corinthian had his or her own thorns to deal with. Whatever it was we all have thorns....

We all have thorns.

When Frederick Buechner was a teenager his father looked in on him in his room and then went down into the garage, started the family car, and sat there inhaling the carbon monoxide that killed him. Buechner – novelist, preacher, writer – spent a good deal of his adult life trying to live with or make sense of that tragic loss. The problem of a good God and the cruel thorns of this life is a fundamental question that Buechner returns to over and over again.

Late in his life, while writing a series of memoirs, Buechner wrote more directly about his father's suicide:

I believe that God was present in what happened. I cannot guess how he was present with my father – I can only guess much better how abandoned by God my father must have felt if he thought about God at all – but my faith as well as my prayer is that he was and continues to be present in ways beyond my guessing. I can speak with some assurance only of how God was present in that dark time for me in the sense that I was not destroyed by it but came out with scars that I bear to this day, to be sure, but also somewhat wiser and the stronger for it.... Even tragedy can be a means of grace.

Paul doesn't detail the specific nature of his thorn but he writes about it as a means of grace. Paul claims that God said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Even tragedy can be a means of grace.

Dear friends, Paul writes that
even in weakness,
even in tragedy,
even in that which breaks us
 God's power can be made manifest,
 God's power can be seen,
 God's grace can emerge...

But, let's be clear.

Paul doesn't claim that this thorn came from God.

Paul doesn't describe the thorn as a test of faith given by God.

Paul doesn't accept the thorn without a fight ~ at least three times Paul asks God to remove the troublesome thorn.

Paul doesn't write that the thorn was given in order to gain some super spiritual insight.

Paul doesn't write that it makes any sense.

Rather, Paul asserts a spirituality of weakness, or brokenness ~ a spirituality that is fully human. Without answers or relief Paul admits that all we have to offer is our thorny selves. The rest is the doing of God. There is nothing to be "boasty not boastful" about. All we can claim, or hope for, or yearn for is that God is, and God will be, present....

The mystery of the gospel is that God in Christ is pierced by the same thorns. God in Christ enters into the fullness of what it means to be human even unto death and from that grace proceeds. A grace that is all-sufficient.

Not always answers,
not always removal of the malignant thorn,
not even reason enough for the thorn,
but finally-ultimately the fullness of God, with us.

So, in the face of that mystery Paul wrestles here with pride ~ the notion that we have it all figured out. And part of what Paul proclaims is that all we have to offer is our common cracked jars of clay. So, don't be too full of yourself. As John Calvin writes of this text:

The valleys are watered with rain to make them fruitful, while in the meantime the summits of the lofty mountains remain dry. Let that man therefore become a valley who desires to receive the heavenly rain of God's spiritual grace.

For most of my life I've wished for a different spiritual DNA. I grew up in the church surrounded by fine Christian people. I've never known a day without the shadow of God. I've wished for and tried to be super spiritual. I've wanted that confidence and clarity.

What I've learned is all that I have to offer is myself ~ even full of doubts and death. And that seems to be good enough for God.

Toward the end of our text Paul writes that

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly in my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me....

The last phrase there can be translated more literally as, "may pitch his tent upon me." It probably refers to the glory of God dwelling in the tabernacle. And, as the glory of God shone through that tent so too it shines through our tents.

So, dear friends, God in Christ has pitched his tent on us.

No matter our thorns,
no matter the cracks in our clay jars,
no matter our doubts and deaths,
may the all sufficient glory of God in Christ shine through our humanity.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.