

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 9) – Year B – July 5, 2009
2 Samuel 5: 1-5, 9-10; Psalm 48; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13
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Close to my old high school is a tall chimney-like tower called Wainhouse Tower. Perched on the edge of a hill overlooking the Calder Valley, Wainhouse Tower is a folly. That is a purely ornamental structure made to resemble other buildings. John Edward Wainhouse built it some time between 1871 and 1875, purportedly as a chimney for his nearby dye works. However, according to local legend, it was really built to spite his wealthy neighbor, Sir Henry Edwards. Legend has it that there was a scandalous tit-for-tat feud around the issue of increasingly higher fences designed to spoil the view of the other neighbor. I think it's fair to say that Wainhouse settled the view issue once and for all, when he built the 253-foot tower that really does offer excellent views for anyone fit enough to trek up 403 steps to the ornate balconies! There are plenty of other follies around the English countryside, and around the world. As we shall see, you and I don't really need bricks and mortar to build a few follies of our own.

The portion of Paul's letter to the church in Corinth that we just heard is generally known as Paul's "fool's speech". The Corinthians themselves were at the heart of all kinds of scandals that Paul addresses in his letters. In fact, the term "to be Corinthianized" was a well known Greek aphorism for becoming thoroughly immoral and materialistic. Idolatry was a real temptation for the Corinthians, as it still is for you and me. The nature of the temptations may be different, but they are there nonetheless. You and I are probably more familiar with stuff like, "Keeping up with the Jones'", but our personal indulgences can quickly become idolatrous when they get between us and God. Today's reading from 2 Corinthians addresses another form of idolatry – self-worship or boasting, and one other very important topic -- that of suffering.

Let's look first at the issue of idolatry. Given Corinth's cosmopolitan population, it would have been difficult for the Corinthian Christians to step outside of the influence of the predominant power structures of the day including the "you scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours" mentality of the client-patron relationship. Boasting was a way of life in Roman culture. Public lists of the glorious achievements of gods, generals, patrons and other city leaders appeared regularly. It probably wouldn't be a surprise to Paul to find that certain influential members of the newly founded Christian community were using their oratorical skills to boast of their elite social and spiritual status. In fact, that ever-popular exercise of self-glorification at the expense of others has been around for a long time. Paul has news for us all on that point.

Humility is one of **two** elements at the heart of the Gospel message. Jesus' gracious gift to humanity came through the incarnation. Jesus' self-emptying, or *kenosis*, is about the humility of becoming human in order to lift up humanity from sin and death to be reconciled to God. The inappropriate boasting of the so-called super apostles that Paul is responding to through his own sardonic boasts also show how skilled Paul is at the ancient art of rhetoric. It is notable that Paul's description of an exceptional revelation or divine vision, widely thought to be his own experience, is not detailed for us at all. Whereas those in the Corinthian church who have had a variety of spiritual experiences have not only shared their visions, but have done so in such a way as to claim superior knowledge or closeness to God. As John's first letter reminds us all, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. (1 John 4:1)." The boasting and divisiveness that resulted from the visions in the Corinthian community of believers is the kind attributed by John to false prophets, who are not building up or edifying the Body of Christ. True divine visions are always initiated by God, given to us by God's grace, and in the testing will always be for the good of the community.

We still get confused about the difference between false humility and honest pride. Paul gives us some help here. In his own words he says, "If I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth." In other words, it is **not** being humble to refuse to share our God-given spiritual gifts, or to speak anything but the plain truth about our talents – neither minimizing, nor exaggerating. What God

desires is that we use what God has blessed us with to the very best of our ability in God's service to help others and to build up the Body of Christ. In so doing, we are glorifying God, and that is like a beacon of light to the world. At the other extreme, it is **not** being humble to go around bragging, especially in order to put others down or -- to use a favorite Pauline phrase -- to puff up ourselves, which is of course a form of idolatry. Given what Paul tells us next, humility may have been a personal challenge for him. He says, "[T]o keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me". As Paul quickly realized there is nothing like pain to remind us of our limitations and human weaknesses.

This brings us to the second element at the heart of the Gospel message. It is one that we can never forget, not just because of the suffering involved, but because of the promise of eternal life. It is this: the life and ministry of every Christian is cruciform or cross-shaped. The Lord answers Paul's prayer, not by removing his thorn, but with these words, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." The power of Christ to which Paul refers is the power of God's saving and sustaining love that is present in Christ's death and resurrection. The life of Christ is manifested in Paul's afflictions and persecutions. And the power of the crucified Lord is revealed in his weaknesses, and in the adversities he bears as an apostle. As Paul discovered, God does not always answer our prayers by removing us from pain and suffering, but God always redeems and gives us new life. For many of us, the promise is that God's power will sustain us in the midst of all of life's hardships.

God never desires our suffering. Notice that Paul describes the thorn as a messenger of Satan. God does not give us cancer, arthritis, or any other disease as some kind of perverse gift to help us become more Christ-like. God only desires wholeness, healing and abundant life for all His children. Nevertheless, because Jesus suffered in this world, suffering is part of our life in Christ. In large measure, it is the effluent of sin, a consequence of humanity's desire to be godlike. Jesus is recognized as the suffering servant of Isaiah's prophetic voice, and like Paul, your life and mine will follow the road to the cross and beyond. Just like the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, it is the triumph of God's grace that continues to redeem the tragic consequences of life in a sin-filled world. God's grace is manifest in our human weakness in at least two ways. God shares in our pain, and gives us the inner strength to deal with life's afflictions. God's presence is more than cold comfort; rather it is life giving, healing, and redemptive. All we are and all we have is a result of God's grace, including our hope for the life to come. For Paul, the thorn in his flesh that Satan intended for evil becomes a means of living into God's grace, and a way to witness to the power of the Gospel. At the core of Jesus' ministry, Paul's ministry, yours, and mine lies endurance and patience, sacrifice and service, as well as love, joy and hope. We are all called to love our neighbors and reject triumphalism that finds its source in inappropriate pride.

John of the Cross says this about the power of God's grace, "Grace gives us the courage, strength, and boldness to let our old way of seeing things and our past way of dealing with life be put to death.... Grace is the touch and movement of God's living power within... it frees the spirit to fly powerfully above all things." Free will gives us the power to build towers of brick, to indulge in all manner of follies, and to brag to our hearts content. Yet Paul rightly understands that the only thing worthy of our boasting is the Good News of Jesus Christ that is the amazing power of God's love. This week, I encourage everyone to pray the question that Paul's letter prompts in our hearts. Let us pray. *"My [God] I see in me a desire to 'own' power and ability... to be strong and capable in and of myself, which keeps me from growing in dependence on you.... Is it power I seek? Or your grace to become?"*

Amen.