

7.4.21 L14P6 God's Grace is Enough

- Of all the early church fathers and church mothers in the Bible, Saint Paul was probably the most remarkable
 - A devout Jew who persecuted the early church, Jesus Christ appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, temporarily struck him blind, and called him into the new, emerging, Jewish-Christian faith
 - Then instead of the persecuting the church, Paul became one of its most fervent missionaries, preaching to both Jews and Romans, planting churches throughout what is now Greece and Turkey, and finally using his house-arrest in Rome to preach in the capital and very heart of the Roman Empire
 - But throughout his seemingly tireless ministry, Saint Paul himself suffered persecution and dangers.
 - As he said in his second letter to the church in Corinth, "I've worked much harder, been jailed more often, beaten up more times than I can count, and at death's door time after time. I've been flogged five times with the Jews' thirty-nine lashes, beaten by Roman rods three times, pummeled with rocks once. I've been shipwrecked three times, and immersed in the open sea for a night and a day. In hard traveling year in and year out, I've had to ford rivers, fend off robbers, struggle with friends, struggle with foes. I've been at risk in the city, at risk in the country, endangered by desert sun and sea storm, and betrayed by those I thought were my brothers. I've known drudgery and hard labor, many a long and lonely night without sleep, many a missed meal, blasted by the cold, naked to the weather. And that's not the half of it, when you throw in the daily pressures and anxieties of all the churches. [11:23-28]"
 - And as if that wasn't bad enough, after Saint Paul wrote that, he was shipwrecked yet again, and when he found refuge on the island of Malta, he was bitten by a snake... and he lived!

- In addition to his long list of persecutions and suffering, Paul was inspired by God to write at least seven letters to churches – letters that we now call books of the Bible, and his students probably wrote about seven additional books – so God used Paul to write the biggest chunk of what we now call the New Testament
- Now here’s the thing – with everything that Paul had done for God and the early church, with all the good works and ministry that Paul had done in Jesus’ name, and with all the preaching and writing where he so clearly put forth the Gospel of Jesus Christ who took humanity’s sin to the cross and gave the free gift of life... for all of that, *you would think that Paul had some extra pull with God!*
- *You would feel that Paul had earned some special consideration from God!*
- *You would think that God would be grateful to Paul, and reward him!*
- NO! ABSOLUTELY NOT!
 - In today’s scripture reading from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians we hear an important message to Paul... and an important message to us about PRAYER AND GRACE
 - In addition to persecution and suffering from doing God’s work, something else was bothering Paul
 - He had what he called, “A THORN IN THE FLESH” – that is some kind of ailment that bothered Paul
 - And at least three times, Paul prayed for this ailment to be healed – that this thorn might be removed
 - But the thorn stayed with Paul. He was NOT healed.
 - And all God would say to Paul was, “MY GRACE IS ENOUGH FOR YOU!”
- We need to hear this message today, because somehow we have been sold a bill of goods about prayer
- In popular culture, in popular piety, we have often come to believe that prayer is about asking God, and then getting what we think we need or want
 - But prayer was first of all NEVER about getting what we want
 - When Jesus’ disciples asked him to teach them to pray, what we now call the Lord’s Prayer begins

FIRST of all by approaching God as a parent who unlike even the best earthly parent, is more than good... this Father-God is Holy, and this parent brings in the Kingdom, the reign, and the will of God

- And before the Lord's Prayer there were the Psalms – the ancient songs of prayer for both Jews and Christians – the Psalms are full of praise, and confession, and lament, and thanksgiving, and then finally sometimes pleas for strength or deliverance
- Or in one of the five-fin models for prayer that is used by Pope Francis and sometimes taught in Sunday School and that DOES pray for people [starting with our thumb] we pray first for the people who are closest to us, then teachers of the gospel, then leaders of the country and world, then the weak and vulnerable, and then lastly –lastly for ourselves.
- Instead of getting what we want, prayer is a pathway to relationship – a prayerful relationship that gives praise and thanks to God, a prayerful relationship that then prays for others, and finally, in prayer we pray for ourselves.
- But what is so easy to miss in Paul's letter for today, is that although the thorn in the flesh remained after praying, God DID assure Paul of something of the greatest value and highest gift – God continued to assure Paul, and God assures us, that *God's grace is sufficient, that God's grace is enough for us!*
 - Grace, the free gift, is greater than anything else, and this grace has already been given to us
 - Beyond the thorns in life, beyond the ailments even when they are life-threatening, beyond the persecutions of Paul or the tragedies that might strike us – beyond all of that, is the assurance from God that grace is enough
 - The grace, the gift, is that we might even work as hard as Saint Paul, but he did not, and we will not earn God's love
 - Neither he nor we will earn God's love, because God's forgiveness, Christ's life, *has ALREADY been given on the cross and through the empty tomb*

- We can't buy it, we cannot earn it, we need not even pray for grace – instead God's gracious love has already been given to us in the cross of Christ
- And that is enough. That gracious gift is sufficient for Paul, and for us.