

“Thorns and Flowers,” A Sermon Offered by Pastor Cheryl Schalm, St. Paul United Church of Christ, July 17, 2022

Good Morning again church family! Aren't these cactuses just beautiful? At best, different? This past Easter season while getting some pictures developed at the CVS pharmacy, a large display of them caught my eye as I was checking out. I could not stop thinking about them throughout the remainder of the day and night. In fact, I awoke the next morning and went to purchase about a dozen of them to give to family and friends. They simply spoke to me. Then several weeks ago while on vacation, I was blessed to see much larger ones in their natural habitat. Again, these thorny, flowering cacti grabbed hold of me as if with a story meant to be shared.

While some people see a blooming cactus as a symbol of love, others see cactus blooms as a symbol of endurance. While they endure dry lands, much heat, and hardship, they still show their beauty.

Generally, cacti are flowering plants. Therefore, almost every type of cactus species is **capable** of flowering when it is mature and in the right conditions. Whether or not a cactus plant blooms largely depends on the care provided it. Based on both, life's experiences and scripture, most can testify to how reflective this is of our own lives.

After the fall of man in the Garden of Eden “thorns” became one of life's penalties of sin and disobedience. If there had been no sin there would have been no thorn; no need for Gethsemane or Calvary. We would all be residing with God in the perfect, undefiled Garden of Eden. However, as we all know, that is not the case. Since Adam & Eve's first act of disobedience, every generation that followed has been disobedient to God's commands.

Thus, as the Apostle Paul cites in Galatians 6:5, while we are in the world "everyman shall bear his own (share of) burdens." Scripture tells us that Paul experienced this first hand. He had his own “thorn in the flesh.” While there is much debate amongst theologians and scholars over the type of “thorn” Paul suffered with, it matters not. Whether it was a physical ailment, a struggle with pride and humility, a struggle with endurance and persecution, or any other type of trial, ailment or struggle, Paul conceded that God's grace was sufficient; that God's power was made perfect through his weakness (2 Corinthians 12:7-8).

Rather than allow his “thorn” to stifle, silence or shut him down, it served to remind Paul of his constant need and dependence on God. It served as a reminder

of God's continuous presence in his life. Instead of turning from God in anger or bitterness as a result of the thorn or trial he had to bear, He drew closer to Him. As a consequence, we sit here today as benefactors of all Paul endured and persevered through. His faith in God's grace and promises has served to help the faith of multitudes blossom and bloom.

While thorns may not be pleasant nor welcomed, they serve as one of the most ancient symbols in the world. A thorn denotes sin, sorrow and hardship. Together with the ROSE, it represents pain and pleasure. The crown of thorns worn upon Christ's head at His crucifixion, serves as an emblem of both Christ's passion and His suffering to save and redeem mankind. And while like these cacti of many different, vary shapes and sizes, my thorns may not look like your thorns; we all have thorns to bear. But church family, let us not be dismayed or downcast; for we also have the free-will to choose the proper and all-powerful care needed to ensure that our thorns will produce blooms, blossoms, and beautiful flowers.

For certain, Like Paul, we too have and will suffer with our own set of thorns. Those things that test us, try us, annoy and frustrate us, challenge us, and yes, at times even hurt us and cause us pain. Our thorns can even serve as our flaws, reminding us that we are not perfect and complete, that we too fall short of God's original plan for humankind.

Since man's first act of freely choosing disobedience (sin) over obedience, God has not removed the "thorn or sting" of sin. For man has freely willed it to coexist with God's goodness. Thus, we live in this imperfect world full of thorns. And while we, like the Apostle Paul may ask for our "thorns" to be removed, let us remember Jesus.

Jesus who unlike us, knew no sin, and had no flaw, asked three times the Father to remove His thorn. But Jesus also prayed three times for God's will. Because God did not remove Jesus' thorn, we are saved, healed, delivered and free from the bondage of sin that otherwise would have kept us from eternal life with our perfect Father in Heaven. As a result of the thorn Jesus' bore, our Heavenly Father extends unmerited, unearned, and undeserved grace to all who choose it.

Like with the Apostle Paul and Jesus, sometimes God may not remove our thorns until such time he replaces them with a crown of glory. Let us not become dismayed though, because with Christ, in all things we are more than conquerors through Him who loves us (Romans 8:37).

Despite the Apostle Paul's frustration and aggravation with people who were opposing and fighting his ministry; with those hindering him from doing as much as he would have liked to do, Paul knew that a man's true colors were quickly seen when confronted by his foes (2 Corinthians 12:7-10); his true character exposed when challenged by his enemies and the things in this life that oppose him. Paul's thorn reminded him that he could not reflect the image of Christ during trying times in his own strength. Thus, he relied upon God's abundant supply.

For as Paul claimed, a weak man with God on his side is strong, but a strong man without God is weak. I think most would agree that it's pretty easy to trust God when things are going good and we are feeling strong, but much more difficult when we are going through trials; when all we can feel is the constant prick of the thorns.

Some of you may know the story of James Whittaker who like the Apostle Paul, chose to look to Christ rather than to his challenging circumstances. James Whittaker was a member of the handpicked crew that flew the B-17 Flying Fortress captained by Eddie Rickenbacker. Anybody who remembers October 1942 remembers the day Rickenbacker and his crew were reported lost at sea.

Somewhere over the Pacific, out of radio range, the B-17 plane ran out of fuel and crashed into the ocean. The nine men aboard the plane spent the next month floating in three rafts. They battled the heat, the storms, the water and the sharks who rammed their nine foot boats. Some of the sharks were reported to be ten feet long. After only eight days their food rations were eaten or destroyed by saltwater. It would be a miracle to survive.

One morning after their daily devotions, Rickenbacker leaned his head back against the raft and pulled his hat over his eyes. A bird landed on his head. He peered out from under his hat. Every eye was on him. He instinctively knew it was a seagull.

Rickenbacker grabbed it, and the crew ate it later that day. The bird's intestines were then used for bait to catch fish. The crew, now with food, survived to tell their story; a story about a stranded crew with no help in sight; a story of lost hope. A story about prayers offered and prayers answered.

After reading about the crew's account in Max Lucado's book entitled, "In the Eye of the Storm," Coreen Schwenk who was engaged to marry the only crew member who did not survive, contacted Lucado. She told him of how she had met and shared time with the widow of crew member, James Whittaker.

Whittaker's widow shared with Schwenk the fact that her husband was an unbeliever. She told her that the plane crash didn't change his unbelief. Even the days facing death didn't cause him to reconsider his destiny. In fact, Mrs. Whittaker said her husband grew irritated with John Bartak, a crew member who continually read his Bible privately and aloud for devotions. But his protests didn't stop Bartak from reading. Nor did Whittaker's resistance stop the Word from penetrating his soul. Unknown to Whittaker, the soil of his heart was being plowed. For it was one morning after a Bible reading that the seagull landed on Captain Rickenbacker's head.

Whittaker's widow shared with Schwenk that it was at that moment that her husband became a believer. The real miracle she informed Schwenk was not a bird on the head of Eddie Rickenbacker but a change in the heart of James Whittaker. The greatest event of that day was not the rescue of a crew but the rescue of a soul.

There is yet another beautiful true story told in the movie, "Four Good Days." It's a story of a mother's tried and triumphant love for her estranged daughter who is addicted to heroin. During one of the scenes in the movie, the mother, played by Glenn Close, tells her daughter Molly she is praying for her and her recovery. When Molly questions her mother and asks her when she started believing in God her mother states, since not believing wasn't working and got me nowhere.

Like the grace-enabled, powerful ministry the Apostle Paul came to realize, God will produce something beautiful from our thorns when we call upon Him, depend upon Him and trust in Him. (2 Cor 12:9). Unlike his opponents who boasted in their status and accomplishments, Paul chose to feature his weakness (1 Cor 2:3; 11:30). By doing so he drew attention to God's strength and power to work His good and perfect will despite of Paul's thorns. The power of Paul's ministry was not in Paul's *persona* or status but in the cross-centered, Spirit-empowered message that he experienced and then began to preach.

In essence, Paul had been crucified with Christ; the old Paul along with all his self-will and preconceived worldly ideals and goals had died and a new life arose. And the new life of Paul manifested the life of **Christ**; it encompassed **Christ's** goodness, **Christ's** grace, **Christ's** mercy, and **Christ's** love (Gal 2:20). It encompassed all the things that we as humans are incapable of encompassing on our own. As a result, Paul boasted only in the cross, in what God had done through Christ, not in anything related to this world (Gal 2:20).

As he reflected on his experiences in light of Jesus' death and resurrection, Paul resolved to serve God *even if* God did not deliver him from trying circumstances;

even if He did not remove the thorn from his flesh. Likewise, we remember the three Hebrews, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who resolved not to worship Nebuchadnezzar's image *even if* they were to be thrown into the fiery furnace (Dan. 3:16-18). And then there is our Lord and Savior, Christ Jesus who resolved to obey the Father, *even if* it meant the cross (Mark 14:32-42).

God's grace becomes greater than our circumstances when we, like Paul, integrate our human weakness with Jesus' death and resurrection; when we reflect upon what that means for us. God's goal is not to make us happy according to the world's definition of happiness. His goal is to make us His. His goal is not to get us what we want: it is to get us what we need. For Jesus, said, "In this world you will have trouble, but be brave (He said)! I have defeated the world" (John 16:33). Some earthly discomfort is a glad swap for heavenly peace is it not?

Like Jesus' disciples when caught in the storm, their boat beaten by the waves, with the wind blowing against them. Let us too, keep rowing and rowing until the time like them, our Savior comes walking on the water to raise the sail and rescue us. And let us never, ever doubt, that while it may not be until the fourth watch, our Savior is always watching, His eye is always upon us. When we allow Him control, He will take control at just the right time.

Paul drank deeply from the inexhaustible reservoir of God's wisdom and grace made possible through Jesus and the cross. May we do likewise when we are pricked by our own thorns. Amen