

Rev. Dr. Niveen Sarras
July 8, 2018
2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Chronic pain is difficult. You have to live with it. Your doctor can give you medicine to help you manage your pain, but medication does not take it away. Chronic pain can make it challenging to handle tasks at home or to keep up with your work. Many times, you stay awake at night because your pain can make it difficult to get a good night's sleep. You take your medication, ~~and you~~ do your exercises, and try to eat healthy. All of this can help you to manage your pain, but it will not take it away. You pray and pray to the Lord to help you. God helps you through your doctors, but you want God to heal you permanently. God answers you “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). God gave the apostle Paul the same answer. He was sick and prayed three times asking God to heal him. Instead of healing him, God told him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Paul was trying to manage his pain and to protect the church of Corinth from the false teaching.

Rival Jewish missionaries (11:22) came to the church of Corinth to introduce them to a different gospel than the gospel they heard from Paul. They accused Paul

of lacking training in Hellenistic rhetoric (11:6), and he did not teach the church of Corinth to seek supernatural spiritual experiences. It seems these false prophets (as Paul describes them) were boasting in their rhetoric speech and spiritual experiences and were able to win some members of the church of Corinth. The Corinthians began to seek supernatural spiritual experiences and spiritual gifts to prove themselves as true believers. Sometimes we think in the same way; we believe that God favors those with spiritual gifts or their faith is stronger than ours. Some Christians believe that speaking in tongues is a sign of strong faith. Other Christians boast in their spiritual gift.

The rival missionaries described Paul as a fool because he did not talk about spiritual experiences. Paul answered them back, if you want to consider me a fool, let it be (11:16). But Spiritual experience is not the most significant sign of spiritual growth.

Paul says twice in his letter “I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles even though I am nothing” (11: 5; 12:11). Paul himself had an ecstatic experience; he went to heaven. He did not know whether he went in body or out of body. He was caught up into paradise and experience exceptional revelations (12:2-4).

Paul does not boast of this mystic ecstasy but in his weakness. Paul struggles with physical pain. He calls his pain a thorn in flesh. Surprisingly, he is boasting in his physical vulnerability, not in his ecstatic experience. This is weird...Right? This is so backward from how the world operates.

This is the mystery of Jesus' grace. Grace appears in weakness. Paul prayed to God to heal him, but God said: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." (12:9). In other words, God told him that through this thorn, God was going to make God's power even more evident. Jesus on the cross was very weak and humiliated, but at this moment, God's power and grace were manifested. Jesus is present in our life. His presence is not limited to ecstatic experience but in our weakness. A miracle does not only occur when you are cured of terminal cancer but also occurs in praising Jesus while you are struggling with cancer and in blessing his name in the midst of suffering.

A spiritual experience comes when you have hope in Christ. It happens when you glorify him and still crying out in pain. Your spiritual life is deepened not when

you see angels, but when you can still turn to Jesus in the midst of your misery.

Paul boasts in his physical pain because he becomes whole through the power of the cross and Jesus. Paul boasts in God who sustains him through trials.

God's power is most significant when we're at our weakest. And what we need most in our weakness is God's sufficient grace, not a dramatic deliverance. We are not used to thinking this way, right?

God is working in your weakness. When you experience like Paul hardship, insult, and calamity (12:10), Jesus meets you in your weakness with his grace and strength you. Our spirituality grows deepest as we struggle and keep focusing on Christ who promised to be with us. If you want to boast, boast about how God sustain you through trials and sorrow.

The same teaching applies to congregations like ours; spiritual roots may grow deepest and strongest as we struggle together to overcome our financial problems, or as we struggle to sell our parking lot, or as we struggle to overcome disagreement over our church vision, or over ELCA social statements. Spiritual growth happens "when we trust each other at new levels and practice the kind of

spirit-filled compassion and ingenuity that finds a way where there appears to be no way.”¹ Burdened and vulnerable, though we are, Jesus is at work among us. His grace is sufficient for ILC because with our limited resources and struggles Jesus’ power can sustain us.

¹ Sally A. Brown, “Commentary on 2 Corinthians 12:2-10,” *workingpreacher* (July 08, 2012), accessed on July 6, 2018) https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1330.