

BOASTING

A COMMUNION MEDITATION

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First Presbyterian Church of Marianna, Florida

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II CORINTHIANS 12:1-10

As part of the Fourth of July Festivities, I heard a song I hadn't heard in a while. It was Lee Greenwood, singing, "I'm Proud to Be An American." I am, you know. I am proud to be an American. And I'm proud to be a Presbyterian, proud to have been the interim pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Marianna, Florida.

Sometimes, I'm sinfully proud. Sometimes, I even engage in a little bragging, a little boasting. And that is contrary to the way we Christians have been told we ought to conduct ourselves. We've been taught, and correctly, that pride is a sin. And we've been taught, and correctly, that bragging or boasting is sinful. We are supposed to be humble and modest, honest and self-effacing.

That is why it is a little strange to hear the Apostle Paul begin a chapter by saying, "It is necessary to boast..."

Of course, Paul goes on to say that he isn't boasting about himself, but about others, and in truth, is boasting about what God has done for others.

Paul tells of an experience, a revelation, that someone else had, of being caught up to the third or highest heaven, caught up into Paradise. Whether this was the experience of John the Revelator, or an experience like some folks have had where they have experienced near-death, or even clinical death, and come back to tell of their visits to heaven, we know not. I suspect the latter, for there is no reason nor record to assume that Paul and John were close.

In contrast to that glory of which he boasts, Paul says that he has been given a thorn in the flesh, an ailment, a malady, to keep him humble, to keep him from being too elated. Some have suggested that this might be arthritis, or gout. Some have said it might have been epilepsy.

Whatever the unknown "thorn", Paul describes it as "a messenger from Satan to torment me in the flesh." A friend of mine once described her diabetes as "the demon that lives in my body." I think she understood what the Apostle Paul was saying, don't you?

Many of us have thorns in the flesh. It may be arthritis. It may be diabetes. It may be the residue of an old injury. It may be damage from a stroke. It may be deafness, or poor vision. Some of us, myself included, may suffer from more than one thorn.

Some of us may have more thorns than a dozen long-stemmed roses!

Paul says that he has appealed to the Lord three times that this thorn would leave him.

And he says that the Lord's reply to him is this:

"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

And then Paul says, "So I will boast more gladly of my weakness, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me."

I was visiting with a colleague in ministry a while back. He told me that he had just been diagnosed with diabetes, and was having to take insulin, as well as watch his diet. He told me that he viewed his illness as a punishment for the abuse he had put upon his body from over-eating and eating too many rich desserts at too many church suppers over the years. He went on to tell me how much he was suffering the consequences of his sins.

He said that God had blessed him, kept him safe, that he'd never been in the hospital in his life, never been sick, and now God was punishing him.

I had to stop him at that point, and tell him that I wasn't sure that he was working for the same God that I was. That the God I worship and serve will indeed let us suffer the consequences of our sins, but that God doesn't punish us.

Dear hearts, I couldn't help myself. I boasted a little. Well, a lot. I took him back through my cancer surgery in 1974, my thyroid problems and hystoplasmosis of the late '70's, my quadruple by-pass that I got for Christmas of 2000, and my two hip replacements a few years ago. I told him about my cure from prostate cancer.

I told him that God had given me the grace to get through all of these things, and had used them to equip me so that I could minister more effectively to people who were suffering, and how God had even used the hospital stays as opportunities for me to witness to members of hospital staffs, and even a roommate or two.

I told him that I could use the health problems I'd had to exemplify patience and faith in suffering, and to give God the glory in my recovery.

I was boasting, I guess, in the same way that the Apostle Paul might have boasted. In the same way that he closed our text, when he said, "I am content

with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, calamities, for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, I am strong.”

God’s grace is sufficient for all our needs.

It is true of us as individuals. It is true of our church. It is true of our nation.

On this Fourth of July weekend, our nation is not in good shape. Our nation may be more bitterly divided along partisan lines, along racial lines, than it has been since the Reconstruction Era following the Civil War. But our nation’s motto is still “In God We Trust.” And our Presbyterian heritage reminds us that “In Life and In Death We Belong to God.”

If we continue to trust, to have faith, God’s grace will indeed be sufficient, and God’s power will indeed be made perfect in weakness. It is when we are weak that we stop trying to rely on ourselves, and begin to rely on God. If we as a nation, as a people, will trust in God, God may just lead us out of the mess that we are in.

And to God be the power, the glory, the dominion and the praise, in the church and in the world, now and forever more. Amen.