

July 8, 2012 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

My favorite verse in the entire Bible is contained in our second reading for today. 2 Corinthians 12:9, "My grace is sufficient for you." If you're a Facebook user you'll remember I put that on the church's Facebook page last week as I was thinking about this sermon.

"My grace is sufficient for you," is God's words to Paul and to us as well. And as J Paul Sampley says in his commentary on 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, "No simpler form of the good news is possible: God's grace is sufficient. Period."

What does this mean? Last week when some colleagues and I happened to meet we compared notes of how our sermons went the Sunday before. You might remember last week we had the raising of the synagogue leader's daughter who died and the unnamed woman with the hemorrhages who was healed. With almost no exception we preached on that text and we all had the same responses from our congregations. They heard the opposite of what we said.

One of the common mistaken messages the congregations heard was this, "God will not give you more than you can handle." That statement is wrong. In fact it is pure rot. Many people will swear it is a biblical quote but it is not, and nowhere in the Bible does it even hint at such an idiotic idea. Just so there's no confusion, the statement, "God will not give you more than you can handle." is wrong and heretical nonsense.

The right way to say it is this, and I owe the Rev. Abigail Zang-Hoffman, pastor at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Fairport for this bit of brilliance. It is not, God will give you more than you can handle. It is, "*The world will never give you more than God can handle.*" Do you see the difference? The difference between the two statements is immense.

In the statement, "God will never give you more than you can handle," it is as if you are in some sort of an antagonistic relationship. In the statement, "The world will never give you more than God can handle," you have God as a close and immediate partner.

There is no lesson on earth that God is going to put you through hardship in order to learn. God doesn't do that sort of thing. You may think it's scriptural, but it isn't. Scour the Bible closely and you discover God's grace at work in hardships that have occurred which result in personal growth. A person learns that God will get him or her through the problem.

Have you ever really considered the true nature of what we consider to be the biblical heroes? They're a bunch of whiney, faithless, incompetent failures! King David was no angel - and not because of Bathsheba. David's problem was that he kept killing everybody to stay in power, including some of his own children. Moses was whiney, suffered failures of faith, and was disobedient at times. Aaron flat out went against God's wishes. Gideon, Sampson, Barak, Jephthah are all faithless faltering leaders. The women weren't much better: Naomi, Ruth, Eve, Job's wife, Mary Magdalene, Martha, the mother of James and John all had serious problems. Back to the men, Peter comes off as a faithless bungling idiot. Paul is said to be a poor speaker and an unimpressive physical presence. Even Abraham, the model of faith according to St. Paul, had more episodes of faithlessness and fear than episodes of the triumph of his faith.

What do all these people have in common? 2 Corinthians 12:9: "My grace is sufficient for you." It means that what you need to be effective is already given to you. It means that you absolutely positively *need* it. You can't begin to survive without it. And, you absolutely positively need *nothing* more.

"My grace is sufficient for you." Let's remind ourselves of what grace means. Grace is a church word we throw around a lot and don't really know what it means. Grace is not what you say before a meal. Grace is having favor without earning it. Grace is at the root of the secure relationship you enjoy with God.

Earthly examples of grace are when you're accelerating on a ramp to merge onto the Thru-way and cars in the travel lane change lanes to let you in. They don't have to. They just do because you are there.

Grace is when you let a complete stranger in line ahead of you at the grocery store because you have a cart full of items and the other person has only one. They haven't earned it. They don't deserve it. You give them that grace simply because they are there and you recognize the value of their time.

Grace is when a soldier dies in a war so that people yet unborn can enjoy freedom and safety. The soldier does not know who will come afterward, only that they have an inherent value.

This is the way God sees you and gives to you. You need this favor from God, and you need nothing more. Grace is not a commodity to be earned, traded for or saved.

Sometimes people have the idea that if they practice Christian religion properly they will grow in faith - that somehow God will be more present to them. While there are certainly spiritual disciples one can use focus on God' kingdom agenda and less on the world's agenda, these do not grow grace.

Aquilla Webb quotes an unnamed famous preacher when asked if he had grace enough to be a martyr. He replied, "No! What do I want with a martyr's grace now? If I am ever called to be a martyr, then a martyr's grace will be given me. What I need now is grace for my present circumstances." Webb continues: Even so, whatever is brought forth in the way of trial will find God's grace brought forth to meet it; but let us live on God's strength moment by moment, so that "As our day is so shall our

strength be." And he has said, "My grace is sufficient for thee."

That, of course, is 2 Corinthians 12:9. So called heroes of the faith do not have a great storehouse of faith they can draw upon that is greater than our own. They are, or were, no different than ourselves. The most that can be said is that they more fully embraced the idea of daily depending on God's grace.

When Paul talks about the thorn in the flesh in our second reading we have no idea what he is referring to. But we do know what it did. It drove him to God's grace.

And here is the ultimate expression of God's grace - the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is the promise that we live by and the hope that empowers us. Relying on God's grace is ultimately not a crutch to carry us. It is a joyous wave of energy that empowers us.

God says, "My grace is sufficient for you." May you be filled with a sense of God's grace and moved to let it flow in your life. Amen