



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
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A Stephen Ministry Congregation
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Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

July 8, 2018

“My Grace Is Sufficient”

(2 Corinthians 12:7-9)

Rev. David K. Groth

“To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’” (2 Cor. 12:7-9).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: O God, Your almighty power is made known chiefly in showing mercy. Grant us the fullness of Your grace that we may be called to repentance and made partakers of Your heavenly treasures; through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen

Paul was given a thorn, a messenger of Satan, “to torment me” he says. We don’t know the nature of this affliction. People have suggested everything from sexual temptations, or a particularly vicious opponent, to migraines, malaria, ear trouble, rheumatism, leprosy, epilepsy, and depression. The plethora of theories tells me we really have no idea. Whatever it was, this thorn tormented Paul. In the Greek, the word for “torment” is a rare word used just three times in the New Testament. It comes from the word “knuckles,” and means to strike with the fist. It was used to describe the beating Jesus received after his arrest (Mt. 26:67). Paul’s thorn was beating him up, pummeling him, hammering him into weakness and humility. It was tormenting him.

When people are tormented by something today, many resort to suicide. About 45,000 Americans this year will commit suicide, and those rates are rising fast. If you have a terminal disease, in four states you can now ask a physician to give you a prescription for poison. 7 in 10 Americans are ok with that, and so many more states will soon follow (Gallup News, 5/27/2015).

Suicide rates are also going up also for those who are not physically sick. Maybe they’re being beaten up by depression or anxiety or a bully on social media. Even people who appear to have had everything going for them take their own lives: Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain are recent examples.

Now, I know perfectly well this text is not about suicide. But I’m willing to push this text to the limits to give me opportunity to speak on the issue, to address a growing and tragic trend not just in America but also in Watertown; to counter with God’s Word a temptation and lie of Satan.

The fearful thing about suicide is that the last act appears to be one of rebellion against God. Murder (including self-murder) is a grave sin in God’s sight. The last act seems to deny the existence

or goodness of God. Suicide says my problems are too big; not even God can help me. Suicide says, "God's grace is not sufficient for me."

Many times, those who commit suicide never put that much thought into it. It's an impulsive act, a reflex action triggered by despair. If they were only to slow down and really think things over, they would realize there is yet hope. They haven't exhausted all sources of help, and that with God all things are possible (Mt. 19). Often, those who commit suicide never intended to do so; they intended to send a message, to cry out for help. But tragically, the handful of pills was just enough to still the lungs.

For some, suffering is the greatest evil, to be avoided at all costs. And when people are suffering, you can be sure the devil is nearby, tempting them to end their suffering by ending their lives. The father of lies tells them there's an easier way out that will bring relief, when in truth it may well bring unspeakable suffering in hell. That's the way the devil works. He comes, Jesus said, "only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come that you may have life and have it to the full" (Jn. 10:10).

Fearful also are the consequences of suicide for family and friends. Kate Spade reportedly wrote a note telling her 13-year old daughter it wasn't her fault. But letters are not enough to assuage the irrepressible sense of guilt and shame family and friends feel after a suicide. "I should have known" people think. "If only I had paid attention." "I should have done something." Maybe someone you loved committed suicide, but you are not responsible. Suicide is, by nature, only something others can do to themselves. It was their decision, not yours, their act, not yours.

A couple of weeks ago in the Wall Street Journal, a doctor wrote of a patient whom he had just diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. The man was already in significant pain. "'I gotta gun, Doc,' he said . . . 'Just let me outta here.' I looked at him closely. He had made the decision and it was final. There would be no debate. The room was silent . . .

until I asked, ‘Have you thought about your wife and what this will do to her for the rest of her life?’ His tears came quickly. He had not thought about his wife. He had not thought about his children. He had not thought about anyone but himself. We talked. He stayed in the hospital. I controlled his pain. His wife and children visited him over the next several days . . . and finished saying goodbye. Then he died a peaceful death.” The doctor concluded, “Many suicides may be prevented and the final moments may then become a time of love and personal dignity.” No such love and dignity in suicide.

God forbids suicide in part because the consequences are horrific. God forbids suicide also because his grace is sufficient. Trouble is, we’ve heard those words so many times we don’t hear them anymore. They are tossed into the bin of our brains where many other pithy and trite platitudes can be found. But this isn’t a platitude to put on the side of a coffee cup; it’s a promise of God to treasure up in our hearts.

“My grace is sufficient for you.” It was true enough for Paul. You remember his background, how he first persecuted Christians with a vengeance. But then a flash of blinding light, and a big voice, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” The Lord had other plans for Saul, now Paul. Paul was to be a living example that God’s grace is sufficient. Paul was to be a chosen instrument to preach Christ and him crucified, to breathe out the Gospel of Jesus Christ, rather than murderous threats against Christians (Acts 9:1). Because God’s grace is sufficient, Paul was able to spread the Christian faith to Asia Minor, to Greece and Italy and Mediterranean islands. Because God’s grace is sufficient, he became the church’s first great theologian applying in written form what Jesus had taught orally. Because God’s grace is sufficient, he universalized the faith making it appealing not only to Jews, but also to Gentiles. He planted churches like you and I plant annuals in spring. And whenever he had ten minutes to spare he wrote letters coaxing, comforting, threatening, explaining, baring his soul, proclaiming Jesus, and proclaiming in so many different

ways that his grace was sufficient.

That's why you don't need to be circumcised, or observe certain religious days, or abstain from certain foods . . . because God's grace is sufficient. That's why you don't need to fear the guilt of sin, or shame, or suffering, because God's grace is sufficient.

Grace is the key word for Paul. "By grace you have been saved" he wrote, which means salvation is free, gratis. There is nothing you have to do to earn it. Salvation is "not of your own doing, it is the gift of God, not of works." We do good works to thank and praise God for saving us, not to manipulate him into saving us.

What thorn is tormenting you? God's grace is stronger, stronger than the devil himself who would otherwise torment us with hellish glee, stronger than any awful disease, stronger than any tortured memories or guilt-laden souls!

Remember Judas, how he betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver? Later, when the shame and guilt came crashing down, he tried to undo his sin by taking the thirty pieces back to the priests. But they had no grace for him, no Gospel words, no forgiveness. Judas went out and hanged himself. But you know, God's grace would have been sufficient for Judas! If only he had gone back to Jesus instead! If only he had been patient and waited until Jesus sought Judas out, (as he did Peter) to assure him of grace. If only he had trusted in God to make things right again. But Judas talked himself out of grace, and tried to make things right himself. Jesus said of Judas, "It would have been better for that man if he had not been born" (Mt. 26:24).

So it seems Judas was eternally lost. What about others. Can God's grace be sufficient for others who have committed suicide? One thing I know is we should never put limits on God's grace. When we do, we're saying God's grace can only go this far, but no further. I also know it is God's job to judge, not mine or yours. When someone commits suicide, we don't say of that person what is only God's to say. It is only unbelief which condemns us, and

though suicide often seems to be the rotten fruit of unbelief, God is the only one who can read and judge the heart justly.

We also remember that out of grace, Jesus died for all people, and on the cross contended with his own thorns, not just those of the crown he wore, but our thorns too: our sin, our shame, our death. For that reason, we can at least hold on to the hope that God can save just about anyone, because we know he died for them.

“My grace is sufficient for you.” However big your problems, God’s grace is bigger. However deep a hole you have dug yourself into, God’s arm is long enough and his grace strong enough to reach down and take hold of you and lift you up and out. However filthy your sin, God’s grace can cleanse you of it. However enormous your shame, God can cover it over with his love. 1 Peter 5, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you” (6-7). Even if you hate the life you live, far better to keep living it in obedience to God. In John 12, Jesus said “Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (v. 25). Run the race, cross the finish line. Don’t you ever quit! Don’t you ever drop out! “Choose life then, that you and your offspring may live” (Deut. 30:19)!

“My grace is sufficient for you,” the Lord said to Paul. I picture Paul sitting there with a lump on his forehead and a few cracked ribs from the last time the boys worked him over. I picture him sitting there with shaking hands, and feeble legs and failing eyes, and somewhere, (who knows where?), that thorn. And with a quill in his hand and parchment on the table, he would write, “Wretched man that I am! Who will save me from this body of death?” Then . . . bearing down on the quill so hard that it might break, “Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Amen.

