

Albany Presbyterian Church

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Kintsugi, the Japanese art of mending broken pottery with gold, serves as a powerful metaphor for embracing our flaws and imperfections. This transformative process, requiring effort and mindfulness, can lead to healing and creating an even more beautiful piece of art. It inspires us to see the potential for beauty in our brokenness. This is also what we see in Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth, in the passage we read in verse 10: This is why for Christ's sake, I delight in weakness, in insults, in hardship, in persecutions, in difficulties. When I am weak, then I am strong.

Reading from 2 Corinthians chapter 12, I wonder if Paul is working out his Kintsugi, recalling his powerful spiritual experience of God's inexpressible things while recognizing and embracing his ongoing suffering of a thorn in his flesh, a messenger of Satan that tormented him. By being completely open in sharing his story of his triumphs as well as his weaknesses, this passage speaks to the Corinthians, as well as us, to the ways that God is present in our lives, holding and piecing together all the pieces of together by his perfect grace so that the light and life of God shines through our lives and our world.

As we know, it was Paul who planted the Church during one of his missionary journeys, and even after, he set out to further his mission, and he wrote to them, teaching them and nurturing their faith to grow. At the time of his letter, it seemed that false apostles had persuaded them; in 11:6, Paul talks about them as trained speakers who claimed power and authority above that of Paul and his contemporaries. They came when Paul was absent from the city of Corinth. They grew as a strong opposition who claimed glory and power, claiming the church, building themselves up, and taking Paul down; they said, "His letters are weighty and forceful. Still, he could be more impressive in person, and his speaking amounts to nothing." Paul calls them the super-apostles. At length, he deals with all their claims in this letter, taking them at their own game, taking the attitude of humility, he says the weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have the divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

In such a context, in that same spirit of humility and faith, Paul cautiously talks about his spiritual experience. In verse 5, he said I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself except my weakness. This is why Paul talks in the third person as he talks about his spiritual experience of seeing and hearing the glory of God taken up in body or spirit into heaven.

As we can all imagine, this was a personal and intimate experience, subjective and easily misunderstood or misinterpreted. This may be why he kept with them for over 14 years. But he is trying to remain faithful to what he had said earlier about not glorifying himself. He said in verse 6, even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I

do and say.” However, this experience has been the assurance of Paul’s calling; this would have given him strength even when he was challenged, persecuted, and threatened with his life.

And yet, because of this experience, he said it was given him what he calls a thorn in my flesh (v.7), which caused him much suffering and unbearable pain. Here, Paul becomes completely vulnerable, disclosing his weakness, the thorn in his flesh, which he calls the messenger of Satan that torments him. And though he pleaded with God in many prayers, this torment of the thorn of his flesh remains. Also revealing his mental and spiritual struggles...

We don’t know exactly what Paul suffered from and what this thorn in my flesh is. However, many commentators say that it was something that all could see. It could have been physical, from an injury while he escaped many prisons and threats of persecution. It could have been mental, suffering from many diseases, like malaria, on his missionary journey through many places prone to malaria, and so on. It could be many things.

The fact that we don’t know what it was, according to some, can also invite us to think about ourselves and what we will see as a thorn in our flesh. It can be physical, but I also wonder if it can also be some mental anguish or social pressure, like Jesus in the gospel story in Mark 6, because of how his relatives and people from his hometown treated him. Mark says they took offense at Jesus, and Jesus could not do his ministry correctly. Jesus was greatly disappointed at their lack of faith.

Paul prayed patiently and persistently. He was very clear and specific about what he wanted done to it. This is almost a perfect prayer. Yet, his prayer was not answered in the way that he prayed. I pleaded with the Lord three times to take it away from me, yet God answered and said, “My grace is sufficient for you; my power is made perfect in weakness.” What kind of answer is this?

This also speaks to us when we pray and feel that our prayers are left unanswered or that our prayers are answered but not in the way we hoped.

This answer to Paul’s very specific prayer was Grace, and so we ask how Grace answered his prayer and also our prayer.

Firstly, God says to Paul. “My grace is sufficient for you.” In that, God’s grace expresses his acceptance and love for us. Grace is God's blessing and love in action. So it is like God saying to us, I love you; isn’t my love enough?

Secondly, He says, “My grace is sufficient for you.” This Grace is the grace of God, the grace of Jesus who suffered and died for us, the Grace of God who gave himself for us; It is the grace of God who created heaven and earth.

Thirdly, He says, My grace is sufficient for you. This present 'is' means that grace is given right now. Not some near and far future, it is not some in the past and no more, but it is here, and now, God offers his grace.

Fourthly, He says My grace is sufficient for you. As if a little fish could swim in the ocean and fear lest it might drink it dry, we worry that the grace of God is not enough. We must remember the grace of our crucified, risen, and exalted, triumphant God, the Lord of all glory, is always more than enough.

Lastly, he says, "My grace is sufficient for you." God sees you more than you see yourself, knows you personally, and calls you by name. He loves us more than we can ever know, and his sufficient grace, he says, is for you.

Therefore, May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now and always. Amen.

Therefore, how does this apply to us?

As God blessed Paul with strength and faith by his grace, God blesses us with the same. With the knowledge of God's grace, as Paul could live out his calling, boldly preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, and overcome the fear of death or persecution, completely dependent on God and his grace. So we also live our lives living our faith completely reliant on God. This is perhaps what Jesus wanted for his disciples when he sent them out two by two in Mark 6:8, taking nothing for the journey, no bread, no bag, no money, and completely relying on God.

Secondly, We need to live in faith, trusting in God in all things. Faith is what holds things together. Faith is what sees the beauty in even the broken pieces, the beauty of God's creation, and restoration and healing. Therefore, when Paul says, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses so that Christ's power may rest on me. I delight in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties for Christ's sake. And this is possible only through unwavering faith and complete reliance on God's grace. And unwavering faith, For when I am weak, I am strong.

And so in this beautiful passage in the 2 Corinthians, in the context of the most complicated and complex conflict and fear, God speaks to us through Paul that in all our perfect lives, to be a human is also to be vulnerable and to know the experience of having cracks, being cracked open, and fear breaking completely. Yet, paradoxically, through our woundedness and imperfection, hope and light might not only be glimpsed, but grace is found and even shared.

We have a God who says to us, even this morning, in our good times and in our not-so-good times... My Grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. So let us be delighted in our weakness, for when we are weak, then we are strong. Thanks be to God.