

Sermon for July 4 2021 *The Rev. Mary Bell-Plouffe*

Many many years ago, in the early 1980's
when I was still Roman Catholic,
I used to lead a weekly bible study for long-term care patients
who lived at the old Peterborough Civic Hospital.
The hospital was their home, they weren't going anywhere else.

We'd meet on the 6th floor in a lounge, everyone in wheelchairs
except Bobby, who was in a geri-chair and took great delight
in goosing anyone who came within goosing distance.
Once in a while, we'd have visitors join us.
One time, Bishop Terence Finlay and his wife came to my bible study.
Imagine, me, a Roman Catholic lay woman
leading a bible study with an
Anglican bishop present!
I'd been impressed with him -- I thought-
boy, this guy really knows his scripture.
I was so very grateful
that the chaplain, Donovan Brown
didn't tell me who he was
until after the bible study was over!

Another time a young woman joined us.
My first impression was that she was a young mom
who'd come up from the maternity ward
one floor below, and had a new baby.
There was such a spiritual glow about her.
It turns out though,
that she wasn't from the maternity floor.
She didn't have a new baby.
What she had was entirely different.
All she'd wanted in life was to be a teacher
and to be married and have children.
But instead she had cancer.
Bone cancer.
Her bones were brittle, her cancer almost whimsical--
she never knew when or where they would break.
When she'd come to the hospital
the doctor had told her that if she turned her neck,

she'd be dead-

bone splinters would puncture her arteries
and she would die.

This young woman was a woman of faith
and during our bible study she shared her experience with us.

In our reading this morning,
from Paul's Second letter to the Corinthians .

Paul is writing about that thorn in his flesh,
and how three times he asked the Lord to take it away,
and three times the Lord replied.

-- **My grace is sufficient for you.**

All through her life, this verse had spoken to her

-- **My grace is sufficient for you.**

She'd always clung to that verse,

and so she figured if that verse had gotten her through easier times
it would get her through her present situation as well.

And so she clung to that verse, like a liferaft:

My grace is sufficient for you.

I don't remember her name.

She died a few weeks after I met her.

But I remember her witness.

I remember her faith.

My grace is sufficient for you.

Paul's writing are often difficult to understand,
and his Second letter to the Corinthians, is I think,
particularly challenging.

Some scholars think that

2 Corinthians is actually one letter,

with part of another lost letter inserted in.

Paul himself had brought the gospel to Corinth.

It was through his work that the Christian church was established there.

But it seems from his two letters we have to the church there,

that the relationship was at times disturbed by doubts and suspicions.

At one time, there's a crisis in confidence

between the apostle and the community.

Let's face it -- that's something we can understand--

pastors and congregations don't always see eye to eye!

But Paul never gives up; he writes hard letters when he needs to,
but his love for the church in Corinth is unwavering.

The backstory for our passage this morning is this:

it seems that certain leaders have been boasting
about their spiritual experiences,
putting themselves above others.

Paul reprimands them for boasting,
and then he goes on to boast himself!

He writes that fourteen years ago, he was taken up
to the third heaven, to Paradise
and that the Lord spoke things to him
that couldn't be repeated.

And then Paul says that to keep him from being too 'spiritually high',
to keep him grounded, so to speak,
he was given a thorn in the flesh,
a messenger of Satan, to torment him.

Paul says that three times he prayed to the Lord
to have this thorn taken away.

And three times the Lord replies,

"My grace is sufficient for you."

"My grace is sufficient for you."

That's the message from Jesus to Paul.

That's the message from Jesus to that young woman in the old Civic Hospital
all those years ago.

That's the message from Jesus to you
and to me.

"My grace is sufficient for you."

That's the foundational truth of
Alcoholics Anonymous,
Narcotics Anonymous,
Gamblers Anonymous
Overeaters Anonymous
and all the other anonymous groups
that help people with addictions;
belief in a higher power
'Let go and let God'

“My grace is sufficient for you.”

But that's not all the Lord says to Paul.
The Lord goes on to say
‘for power is made perfect in weakness’.

What a counter-cultural world-view;
power made perfect in weakness.
It was counter-cultural in the time of Jesus and Paul,
living in a Roman Empire built on power through might.
It's been counter-cultural ever since.

Power is made perfect in weakness.

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it's when we give up trying on our own,
it's when we call on our Lord,
it's when we give up **our** claim to power
that the Lord can then reveal **His** power.

Power is made perfect in weakness.

Think of the cross.
It's the ultimate symbol of weakness and impotence,
but it's through the cross,
the symbol of weakness
that God reveals redemptive power.
Through the cross
weakness becomes the means to genuine strength.
That's the mystery of the cross.

Power is made perfect in weakness.

How would we see that today?
Maybe with the Pope offering an apology to First Nations peoples.
Maybe with all our Churches letting go of our differences
letting go of our 'turf'
and focussing on what unites us;
and then using our joint resources of people and property
for new and creative ministry--
God knows there's need.

A week ago Friday, Bishop Andrew Asbil
apologized to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender,

Queer, Two Spirit, Plus Community in the Diocese of Toronto.
There's a copy of that apology in the email Drew sent with
our bulletin and Zoom link.

We need to read it, and to let those words settle into our hearts.
We each need to pursue a path of reconciliation
with those from whom we're estranged
risking new relationships with folks we do not yet know.

My grace is sufficient for you.

Power is made perfect in weakness.

This is my last Sunday with you as your Interim Priest in Charge.
We have journeyed together for five months.
Next Sunday, you will be able to worship in person,
with Bryce as your pastor and priest.
It's time to say 'Good -bye'.
'Good-bye' is a contraction of the old English words
'God be with you'.
So I say to you 'Good-bye'.
And one last story.

Many many years ago, in the early 1930's
a young university student
was hitchhiking in the Eastern Townships of Quebec.
One time he was picked up by a French-Canadian Jesuit priest.
When the ride was over, the young student thanked the priest for the ride
and the priest said to him
'It has been a privilege to have been of service'.
Those words made a powerful impression on the student --
the idea that serving others
wasn't a duty or a moral obligation, but a privilege.
This young man went on to marry and have children.
He instilled this same concept in those children,
repeating over and over again, the story of hitchhiking
and those words spoken by the Jesuit priest.
That student became a physician, and was a pioneer in the treatment of addictions.
He was the first in Canada to offer addiction treatment services to women.
He founded the first hospital in Ontario
where treatment for alcohol addiction was covered by OHIP.
And that phrase **'It has been a privilege to have been of service'**,

was his life motto, his mantra.
That man was Dr. R. Gordon Bell,
my dad.

And so with the words of that Jesuit priest,
with the words of my dad
I say to all of you.
'It has been a privilege to have been of service'.

Amen.