

From The Pastor

Happy Fourth of July! Enjoy the rest and recreation of this holiday of Independence. Our freedom and independence is long standing enough that it is easy to take for granted. For many generations we have enjoyed the freedom and independence won for us by the sweat and blood of our fore bearers. Freedom and independence has been the struggle for many countries much smaller than ours even to this day. History has proven the trials of colonialism and unjust ownership of property and persons. The challenges of justice and human freedom persist to our day in many places in the world.

We have been richly blessed by the courage and adventure of those who traveled to this country, colonized it, and then fought for the right to be free. Give some thought to this during the holiday and say a prayer for our country. It is easy to presume the entitlement of all we enjoy, when in fact our freedom comes at a great price and the duty of great responsibility. Not only are we blest with freedom and independence, we have also been richly blest with a beautiful and resourceful country. As we awaken to the challenges and responsibility of 'green' living, may we value, appreciate, and preserve the great land we have inherited.

It may be a stretch, but perhaps St. Paul knew the contemporary phrase, 'its hard to be humble'. Paul was indeed a humble man, yet for him it was not a quiet or diminishing virtue. When it came to defending his identity in Christ and the work he did to bring the gospel to others, Paul was animated and bold in sharing the power that was his in Christ. In the context of today's second reading, Paul is defending against the inflated pretenses and accusations of those in the community who questioned his credentials to preach the gospel.

St. Paul was a mystic, and was blest with visions and visitations for the Lord. If Paul was interested in doing so, he could have become quite egotistical about the blessings and power the Lord afforded him. This was not his intent or desire. In fact, he takes this occasion of accusation to confirm not only his qualifications to preach Christ, but also his weaknesses that empower him with grace.

Turning every circumstance into an opportunity to preach Christ, Paul admits the burden and distraction of a 'thorn in the flesh' that he identifies as Satan, that he might not become inflated. This thorn in the flesh is the source of endless debate. There is good evidence that it may have been an individual who constantly tormented Paul with derision and accusation against his work of evangelization. More important for our purpose is what Paul learned from the experience.

Longing to be free of this torment, whatever it was, Paul begged three times for deliverance. In a rather stunning response, Paul hears from the Lord himself, 'my grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness'. Though this might seem like a bitter pill to swallow, Paul takes it as great relief and realizes its wisdom.

Realizing and accepting the limitations of his human weakness, Paul can surrender to the surpassing power of grace. Paul is not in this work of evangelization by himself. It is God's work, and Paul learns to yield to the power of grace at all times. In other words, he learns to depend on Christ so much more than upon himself.

I do not think Paul learned this over night. Like ourselves, Paul was a man who liked to be in control of all that lie before him. He did not like to be vulnerable or unknowing. He knew who he was in Christ, he knew the power of the Good News, and he had a mind and a heart to preach that word to others. Only the trials and derision he faced caused him to realize his weakness and inability to persist without the surpassing grace and help of the Lord.

How does this message affect you and I? We too have trials and difficulties that hinder and frustrate us. We do not want to be vulnerable or out of control in any circumstance. However, the reality is that we do have weaknesses and are in need of help beyond ourselves. Perhaps the greatest hindrance to spiritual maturity is our self-sufficiency. We want to go it alone and be masters of our own fate presuming we can manage the burdens that cross our path.

As Paul himself might say, this is foolishness. Why struggle and suffer on our own when we have sufficient grace coming to us from Christ. Perhaps it is a matter of not admitting we have weaknesses or issues beyond our control. Paul learned and Paul yielded to Christ. So much so that he would boast of his weaknesses and trials that he might more readily receive and realize the grace of God's help.

When we realize and admit our limitations, seeking the help of others, we find new power. Paul could not do it all himself, and neither can we. I find this wisdom most comforting. Despite my limitations, weaknesses, or flat out failures, the grace of Christ is given to me and will be sufficient to my needs. By myself, I can do little. Realizing and accepting the grace of Christ I cannot fail in all he sets before me. Depend on Jesus more and more. He is always with you with love and grace.

Father John Esper