

**LAKESWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

**Rev. Terence A. Lucarelli**

**February 3, 2008**

**A THORNY AFFAIR**

**2 Corinthians 12:1-10**

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On this Sunday, the biggest religious holiday in football America, what a better way to start a sermon than with a Golf story. Alright ... I couldn't find a football story that would be an appropriate introduction to my sermon. So it's about Golf ... *sort of*.



The day became memorable. Thursday, June 12, 2003. Olympic Fields, Illinois. The first round of the 103<sup>rd</sup> U.S. Open would be remembered and celebrated with *laughter* and *tears*. Tom Watson, at age 53, with an exemption was invited to play the U.S. Open. His caddy, Bruce Edwards, a resident of Ponte Vedra Beach, walked beside him.

A glorious round of golf was in the making for this long-time pro and his faithful caddy. Watson shot a 5 under par 65 for a stunning share of the first round lead.

Edwards, 48, had carried Watson's bags since 1973. However, in November of 2002, Edwards was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease. There was thought of Edwards retiring from being a caddy, but Watson wanted Bruce to journey with him at the U.S. Open. And as it turned out, Watson's brilliant round provided him a national stage to discuss the importance of ALS research so that someday a cure could be found.

At the end of the round, as Watson's '65' was being celebrated, Edwards said through slurred speech, "We turned back the clock today." On the 17th hole of Watson's round of golf, the ball hung on the cup for 6 to 8 seconds before dropping in for a birdie. After this historic round of golf, nostalgia, tears and cheers, a reporter asked Edwards if he could put into words what Watson means to him. Edwards said nothing ... He only *wept* and reporters stood silent letting him cry. Finally when Edwards regained his composure he said, "I *love* what I do, I *love* working for Tom Watson."

On April 8, 2004, Bruce Edwards lost his bout with ALS. His death at his home came one night after the *Golf Writers Association of America* honored the caddie with the Ben Hogan Award, an honor given annually to an individual who continued to be active in golf despite a physical handicap or serious illness.

**The tenacity and fortitude of Bruce Edwards has a familiar ring when we read the words that Paul wrote to the church at Corinth in the midst of his painful daily experiences.** Paul, in chapter 4 of his 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to the Corinthians, said:

*"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies"* (2 Corinthians 4:8-10).

Or paraphrased, Paul might say, "I *love* what I do, I *love* working for Jesus Christ."



**Now understand clearly here that Paul was being attacked.** The church he had founded in Corinth was beginning to think Paul didn't have what it takes anymore. There were others, evangelists down the street, who were bringing in the crowds. They were having emotional services of worship. There were miracles. But they were playing a little loopy-goopy with a variety of theological positions ... *they were doing what the people wanted*. They were appealing to the *common sense* of their listeners and then signing Jesus' name. They were saying, "Come follow us. You won't be compromising your values and your principles. But we'll make it easy for you to believe."

They attacked Paul's manner of speech and they accused him of not having a relationship with God because he had daily physical pain ... where was his faith? His physical appearance was attacked. They said he was short, insecure and tactless. Everywhere he went he offended people and it was for sure *THEY* didn't offend people. They made people happy. Paul was always in jail, always getting beaten up; he rubbed people the wrong way. These others said, "Surely God has better taste than working through this little, ugly man called Paul."

Pastor Barbara Brown Taylor says the following:

"By his own count, Paul had suffered five public whippings and three beatings with rods. He had been stoned once, shipwrecked three times, imprisoned more often than he could remember. When death jumped out in front of him he hardly flinched any more. He lived in constant danger; danger from raging rivers, danger from bandits, danger from his own people, danger from his enemies."

Paul's rational was about how he had envisioned God in marvelous ways. He talks about someone, meaning himself, who was lifted to the *third heaven*, who was converted and transformed, who felt the presence of God and the love of God.

Then Paul says, "But I am not here to brag or tell you that you've got to experience the same kind of highs that I have. No. *I am here to tell you about how God has USED me through my WEAKNESSES.*"



**The passage of Scripture this morning talks about Paul's "thorn in the flesh."** What he's doing is indirectly speaking to those evangelists up the street who are trying to tell folks that once you are a Christian, your troubles are over ... there are *no problems IF* you have enough faith. But what Paul says to counter this kind of mindset is, "*Even though I have experienced the spiritual heights, it's through the thorn in my flesh that I have grown in my relationship and understanding of God's PRESENCE and God's GRACE and God's LOVE.*"



Now, the "thorn" in Paul's side has produced much speculation through the years. Everyone wants to know what it is ... but no one's exactly sure. Some scholars guess it was *epilepsy*; others, *migraine headaches*; some say *malaria*, *depression*, *partial blindness* or a serious *speech impediment*.

The reality is, Paul *saw* the third heaven, *had* a vision, was *transformed* and *born again*. This holy man was bugged and stabbed and harmed and in pain every day of his life with "*a thorn in the flesh*."



Everyone of us, if we had time to talk and share, have *days*, maybe even *whole years*, when we feel short, and weak, and insecure, and tactless, and ugly like Paul.

Yes, we deal with “*a thorn in our flesh.*” But the question I have for *EACH* of us is: Is it possible that God works through our weaknesses? Do you really believe that when we surrender these “*thorns*” to Christ, he can actually use our weaknesses so that others might see Christ’s strength in us?



**These “thorns” can be physical or psychological.**

- ➔ The “*thorn*” can be deep grief.
- ➔ Then there is the “*thorn*” of betrayal.  
In Arthur Miller’s play, “The Crucible,” set at the time of the Salem witch trials of the 1690s, one character says, “God, why is betrayal the only truth that sticks?”
- ➔ The “*thorn*” could be divorce or the pain associated with separation.
- ➔ The “*thorn*” might be a child that’s in a “far country” as with the Prodigal Son ... a child whom we feel has disgraced us or maybe even the child feels somehow they were the ones disgraced by *US*.
- ➔ The “*thorn*” could be a lack of judgment.  
One husband and wife said they were always ‘*historical*’ and someone replied you mean ‘*hysterical*’. “No,” they said, “Historical. We always seem to *remember* and *remind* each other of our *lapses of judgment*.” These, too, can be “*thorns in the flesh.*”

Paul was honest. Our passage says he prayed on *Three Different Occasions* that this “*thorn*” be removed and the answer was, “No.”

Now, I believe these were not quick prayers. I believe these three prayers happened over a long, extended period of time.

Let’s look at these three prayers:



**THE FIRST PRAYER**

Paul’s first prayer, like our first prayer in situations like this, most always starts with self-pity. “Dear God, I thought I’d taken good care of myself. I thought I’d done what you had expected of me. I’ve believed that you would take care of me and now look – look at the pain I’m in.” We let God know how disappointed we are in the circumstances we’re facing. It’s a prayer of self-pity.

What we often pray is, “*MY Father* who art in heaven...” and we share our self-pity. But we are actually called to pray “*OUR Father...*” That includes *ALL* those who are inflicted by the “*thorns*” of life. When we say, “*OUR Father...*” it includes the spouse, it includes the parent with whom we are arguing, it includes the fellow church member. “*OUR Father...*” includes us ALL.

No doubt Paul got up from the first prayer feeling like he had at least been honest with God. Somehow he had dumped some of the mud at the foot of the cross and he felt better by sharing honestly his hurting and throbbing pain. But the prayer was *NOT* answered.



**THE SECOND PRAYER**

How long do you think the time lag was between the first and the second prayer? Often our prayers of self-pity go on for weeks and months ... trying to convince God that *OUR common sense* should be his will.

The second prayer, that no doubt Paul prayed and has been our experience as well, is a recognition to God that the “thorn” is teaching us some good lessons. Through our weaknesses, we are growing in our relationship with God.

- ➔ We learn of course, in any relationship there must be tears and laughter for there to be the multi-colored rainbow of life.

- ➔ We begin to realize that prayer is not an answer-all and miracles sometimes don't happen.

It's in this style of prayer that our God invites us to take our "thorns" and give them into his loving arms. All of a sudden God's heart is wounded as well with the "thorns" we've experienced. And here, we grow through our pain. In our pleasures and in our difficulties we begin to learn about the LOVE of God in all PLACES and all TIMES.



### **THE THIRD PRAYER**

As we move from that place of self-pity into an understanding of our weaknesses and begin to grow through the "thorns" and in our relationship with God, we then progress, as Paul did, to a third kind of prayer. Sure, the answer may still have been "no" for Paul and for YOU and ME, but nonetheless, Paul received his answer: "*My grace is sufficient for you...*"



Alice had been through this many times before. She could not remember how often her hopes were raised only to have them dashed to the floor. *The pattern was always the same. First, there was the call to leave the dorm room she shared with others at the orphanage. Then there was the wait outside of the superintendent's office, listening to the muffled voices discussing her behind the closed door. Words like "slow" and "difficult" came through often. Finally, there was the inch-by-inch scrutiny that made her feel more like a specimen under a microscope than the homeless, parentless girl that she was. She hated the women who looked at her the way they did, like a piece of meat hanging in a butcher's shop. They all smelled like lilacs and Alice hated lilacs.*

Bad memories came back as she now stood under the searching stares of the young man and woman in front of her. She remembered how one lady would not even look at her after she saw how poorly her dress fit her. Another did not want to have anything to do with her because she *stuttered* and the servants would only laugh at her. Yet another was afraid that Alice's *clubfoot* would make her too clumsy to be a good *servicing girl*. Tears welled up when she remembered how she was once slapped when she tripped and her hands brushed against the lilac-smelling woman's soft fur coat.

*And so, Alice felt very self-conscious in front of this couple.*

The woman's hair was soft and radiant and Alice's was a tangled mass of knots. The woman's face was clean and glowing while Alice's was dirty and tear-stained. In vain, Alice tried to hide her *misshapen foot* behind the good one. The pretty young lady sat erect in front of Alice. The folds of her long dress reached neatly to the floor. Slowly, the tall, handsome man walked around Alice. At intervals he would stop, glance toward his wife and raise an eyebrow as a thin smile barely traced itself on his lips. He circled Alice a couple of times and then went to the side of his wife. *Not a word was spoken as they looked deep into one another's eyes for the longest time.*

Finally, he turned to the superintendent who sat behind the mahogany desk and said, "Yes, she's the one. We would like to have her." *The superintendent shook his head in disbelief.*

Alice was stunned. "Y-y-y-ou m-m-mean y-y-you want me t-t-to b-b-be your s-s-servicing g-g-girl?" she asked.

"No, Alice," the pretty lady said. "We want you to be our *daughter*."

Alice could not believe what she heard. No one had ever said that to her before. Often she dreamed about what it would be like having a mother and a father and a

home. "It can't be true," she said to herself. She wanted them to tell her again. "You *really* want me to be your *daughter* ... to *live* with you in your house?" *Alice was not even aware she did not stammer a bit.*

"Yes," the handsome man said. "We've never had any children. My wife and I have so much love to give, and we want to give that love to you. We want you to be happy."

"But why me?" Alice asked, remembering the many times she was turned down before by the others.

The pretty lady stood up and smiled at Alice. Slowly she reached down and lifted her floor-length skirt and revealed her own malformed foot. *Softly, lovingly and understandingly*, she said to Alice. "Today, we want you to be our child. Please, Alice, let us *love* you."



### **DO YOU UNDERSTAND?**

Dear friends, whatever "*thorn*" you are bearing today—whether it is *physical suffering* or *psychological hurt* and *pain*—Please remember that, just as Christ graciously sustained Paul in the midst of his "*thorn*", so God's grace is available to *YOU* this very day.

**Christ's message for you is this:**

**My *grace* is sufficient for you;**

**My *strength* is independent of human ability;**

**My *power* is displayed in human weakness;**

**and My *will* is lovingly advanced despite the infirmities of your body**

**or soul!**

Personally, I am well content with my "*thorns*", my *weaknesses*, not because they are desirable in and of themselves, not because they are painless, *BUT BECAUSE* they are the vehicle through which the *all-sufficient grace* of my wonderful Lord and Savior is revealed to those around me.

**Let us never forget that our *weaknesses* provide the best opportunity for God's *love* and *grace* to *AFFECT* the world around us.**

**Behind all our *doubts*, *insecurities*, and *anxieties* is the *ASSURANCE* that God is revealing His Son *IN* and *THROUGH* our lives.**

**Paul's *message*, and his *entire life*, was the revelation of that fact.**



***Softly, lovingly and understandingly*, God says to each of us, "Today, I want you to be my child. Please let me *LOVE* you."**

Amen and Amen.