

Augustana College  
Chapel of Reconciliation

*Wholly Weak*

Pastor Paul Rohde

5 April 2004

A reading from II Corinthians, chapter 12 *Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but God said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness. So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weakness, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.*

God, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change. Amen.

I am frankly glad we don't know exactly what Paul's thorn was. It makes the metaphor wonderfully accessible to all kinds of irritating experiences. There are some who believe it was an ophthalmologic problem—when Paul concludes his letter to the Galatians he says, "See with what large letters I write when I write with my own hand." Paul, creating the original LARGE print, apparently couldn't see. We know Paul had many opponents—both Jewish and Christian—and faced intense persecution. The thorn could be these people or circumstances. And then there are wildly speculative notions about his personality or his politics or his sexuality.

So people use the "thorn in the flesh" to pray—for pain, in the eye or elsewhere. To pray for whatever persecution or opposition they are facing. For students, the thorn is some professors. And for professors, it is some students, depending I guess on which side of the desk you sit. And in an election year—especially given some of the issues—I expect rather wild application to politics, person and sex.

*To keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan.*

Whatever the thorn is, it makes Paul aware of what he cannot change. Though I've taught and preached it dozens of times, I'm hearing it differently today. Not so much about the thorn out there; as the weakness in here. I suspect this new awareness emerged from my own circumstances.

You see it was not a very large hole in the ice on January 2—maybe about the size of a compact car. My father was enjoying his favorite winter pastime, ice fishing, until he met the hole. The rest is, as they say, history.

I can't deduce for sure if its because of the way dad died or my own psychological make up. I experience grief like a hole. I'm cruising along, doing the work I love, chasing my teenage children, drinking coffee, and suddenly bottom caves and I experience the most abject weakness of my life. This is not yet *wholly weak*. But it is the most profound signal I've gotten yet that some place, some time, for me and for all of us, there will be hole in the universe. Whether that hole is in front of us or within us matters not. Life is taken.

My fear in preaching this, students, is not that you think me weak, but that you would miss your strength. With papers, classes, finals, you are not *wholly weak* and I would not have you excusing your power by using this superficially. You have strength. . . and I'd preach to that any day.

I am not advocating unthinking, irresponsible, cavalier, stupid actions in the name of weakness, any more than Micah Aberson was advocating prostitution in his sermon on Friday. He took a risk and spoke of prostitutes and the slimes who exploit them so that we think about the breadth of God's grace.

I'm taking the risk so that when you encounter that which you cannot change, you will have heard that God's grace is yet deeper. When it comes to making peace with history, being forgiven, facing grief and death, God promises Paul and us that grace is sufficient, power is perfect. Last fall at Convocation, Dr. Pederson asserted that Learning to Die is Learning to Live. I hear the trust of what she said because out of the deep hole of death and grief it is clear that grace is deeper still.

The passage is not about thorns as much as its about weakness. And it isn't as much about weakness as it is about the grace of God. God says, "My grace is sufficient. It is about the perfect power of trust--when trust is all you have.

So these 7 days are holy—set apart—to remember the very center. God's grace living, active, moving through the holes. The week is full of holes. We witness holes in friendship and loyalty, in the evidence and trial. Ironically, Herod and Pilate decide with Jesus as common enemy the hole between them isn't as large. There are holes in his hands and side and feet and finally in God forsakenness he is *wholly weak*.

God endures. . . and grace is sufficient. The promise to mend is more powerful than the forces that rend. The sufficiency of grace in which we trust is made whole.

My cousin is losing her 49 year old husband this year to ALS. In her Christmas letter last year she wrote that she couldn't imagine God could help her without changing the diagnosis. Then she wrote of the limits of her imagination. The diagnosis has not changed, but in support for her grief, neighborly kindness, the persistent mystery of life and power of love, she is sustained and convinced anew that grace is sufficient.

God's grace is sufficient. We discover its power in weakness to know that it is the foundation of our lives not only for weakness but strength, not only for dying but living, not only for the h-o-l-e-s but w-h-o-l-e-s. Amen.

# MORNING WORSHIP

Monday, April 5, 2004

**Prelude**                    “Prelude in G Minor”                    JS Bach  
David Prowant, Organ

## Welcome/Announcements

**Service of the Word**                    LBW p. 127  
**Dialog**                    LBW p. 127  
**Creed**                    LBW p. 128  
**Prayer**

**Hymn**                    “Amazing Grace”                    LBW #448

**Text**                    II Corinthians 12: 7-9

**Sermon**                    “*Wholly Weak*”                    Pastor Paul

**Hymn**                    “My Song is Love Unknown”                    LBW, v. 1, 4, 7

**Prayer**

**Lord’s Prayer**

**Benediction**

**Postlude**                    “Oh, World I Now Must Leave Thee”  
Johannes Brahms

# HOLY COMMUNION