

Seventh Sunday of Pentecost

April 7, 2024

Samantha McRae

Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church

“I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows— was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. 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 he 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 weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

-2 Corinthians 12: 2-10

In 1961, Kurt Vonnegut wrote a short story entitled, “Harrison Bergeron”, included in the short story collection *Welcome to the Monkey House*. In this story, the whole of society has become equal. The story begins in this way:

“THE YEAR WAS 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren’t only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General.”

The “Handicapper General” would assign handicaps to people based on their advantages. Those endowed with beauty wore masks with horrible faces; the intelligent would receive “mental handicap radios” in their brain, which would emit a horrible sound every 20 minutes to prevent them from using their minds to their advantage; many people would wear a padlocked “handicap bag” of varying weight around their neck at all times- a bag full of birdshot, the smallest of shotgun ammunition. To offload this bag was a criminal act. Removing a single ball of birdshot was punishable by 2 years in prison and a two-thousand dollar fine. Each subsequent ball removed added an additional 2 years imprisonment and two-thousand dollar fine. In Vonnegut’s story, two people, Hazel and George Bergeron, are watching ballerinas dance on television, and though they have a son, the titular Harrison Bergeron, he is not there. Even at age 14, his height, his intelligence, even his beauty is too great and the Handicapper General confiscates him. He is imprisoned. His parents each remember they have a son, and cry for him often, but they never remember why.

Harrison escapes his confines and bursts into the theater where the ballerinas are performing. On live television, his 7-foot frame towering over anyone who might try to confront him, he declares that he is now the Emperor, everyone must obey him, and he asks for any woman willing to stand up and become his Empress. When one of the ballerinas stands up to join him, he rips off the handicaps from the heads of the musicians and demands they play to their full potential, their abilities no longer dampened by the handicap placed on them by the government. Harrison and his empress begin to dance, leaping so high they kiss the 35 foot ceiling. Just then, the Handicapper General bursts into the theater and shoots them both so that they fall, dead, to the ground.

This story was the first thing that came to my mind after reading this epistle passage. At first, I had mistakenly thought it was a part of another short story collection written by Vonnegut, and had nearly the entire premise wrong, but what I did remember correctly, the thing that linked these two written works together in my mind, was this thing around the necks of civilians that kept them humble; the “handicap” that would correlate to the above-average-ness of the person to which it was assigned. Whereas the citizens in Vonnegut’s story were observed and evaluated, then given a corresponding equalizer, Paul describes in his letter a mysterious “thorn in his side” assigned to keep him from being too elated by what was heard in the third heaven.

These gifts seem to be more of a curse than they are a blessing, met with some way of being punished for the good things God had given. I want to be clear- I don't think God gives us talents or advantages and then denies us the ability to use them. I, personally, don't believe God works that way. When Paul speaks about this "person" he knew who was caught up to the third heaven and heard these wonderful things, he was speaking about himself, but he didn't want to be seen as braggy or boastful, so he framed this story to boast on behalf of someone else. This was apparently a common practice. At this time in history, it was customary to tell a story from the perspective of someone else in order to make a point, and Paul uses this story as an opportunity to speak for the benefit of the people he is writing to. During this time, there were a few circumstances considered acceptable for boasting: defending oneself, replying to charges made against them, addressing the arrogance of others, speaking for the benefit of the people being spoken to, or the incredibly vague notion of "necessity"- when one is absolutely compelled to do so.¹ Paul, it is believed, was using this letter as a way of sort of "anti-boasting", where he brags about his weaknesses, but not just any old weaknesses, his weaknesses as they pertain to his reliance on Christ.

Initially, I was quite caught up in the reference to the "third heaven" this person was *caught up* in. I wanted the explanation behind this third heaven, to know what it was, and what the first and second heavens might be, hoping that this would give more context to this passage of the letter. What I found out was, historically, some Greek philosophers thought that only pure souls would rise to heaven when they died, so many would sit in contemplation about heaven during life on earth. Similarly, many Jewish philosophers would try to mystically pursue visions of God's heavenly place by meditation, contemplation, fasting, etc. According to Jewish texts, there were believed to be anywhere from 3 to 365 different heavens! Considering a lower heaven to be the realm of the air and the birds, Paul appears to be experiencing the heaven in which there inhabited God's throne, what might also be known as "Paradise".² Here, he heard things that, we are to assume based on the text, are so great and grand no mortal is meant to experience them, much less speak about them to other mortals.

You might see why Paul was looking to do a little back-door-bragging.

Instead, Paul was held back by the “thorn in his side”. Scholars have ideas about what this thorn might have been, whether it was physical or psychological, or perhaps the struggles he describes in the verses leading up to this passage. Whatever the case, he doesn’t name them explicitly. Instead he says, “a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.” Here, he is referring back to Job³, where God tells Satan he can essentially do as he wishes to test the limits of Job’s faith. Ancient Jews and Christians believed that Satan needed permission from God to affect God’s servants⁴, so three times Paul appealed to God, asking God to remove this affliction, but to no avail.

Why does Paul believe God is the one to give him this barrier? To what end?

Is it so Paul would not become too arrogant and no longer see the need for God? Perhaps.

Does God intentionally give us suffering to test our faith and reliance on Him?

I don’t know. But, I’m not inclined to believe this way.

What I think Paul is really pointing to here is the *opportunity* given to him through his weakness. In this affliction, this “thorn in his side”, Paul is given a choice- he can say, “Oh this wonderful thing happened (getting caught up to the third heaven), but now Satan is trying to hinder me by this rather painful and inconvenient thing (the thorn).” Or he can say, “Oh this wonderful thing happened, and even though the world still continues to go in the way the world goes, and I have pain that constantly plagues me, I still have God.”

God might not be afflicting Paul with this ailment, or allowing it to happen so that he can shine through, but Paul is taking advantage of his weakness to glorify God.

But, why? Why is Paul using his weakness to brag on God? Why can’t he do that when everything is super great and things are perfect and he is on top of the world? He absolutely can. However, if Paul is anything like the rest of us humans, and far be it from me to compare any one of us to Paul, it might just be that it’s a little easier to forget to touch base with God in those good times. Or at least to recognize what God is doing for you.

To use myself as an example, I have often found that my prayerful dry spells come at the times when I am less than burdened: when we have more money than we need to get by, when I haven't had a depressive episode in several weeks, when the kids are okay and bills are being met. In the same way, as a teenager, I would be too busy to call my dad until I ran out of gas money, at which point I would have a terrible conviction to go see how the old man was doing, purely out of the goodness of my heart (naturally).

But Paul's letter speaks beyond this. Just as a handicap was given to citizens so they would not be able to become too powerful in Vonnegut's story, in life, when we have nothing to check our power or our drive for that power, we can often find ourselves losing track of the initial purpose. When we become too invested in our own drive, and we use our platform or our abilities for personal gain rather than the benefit of the whole, we bring an imbalance upon our situation that has the potential to tear down not only ourselves, but our entire society. This is why it is not money itself that is the root of all evil, but rather the *love* of money. This is why ambition is a gift, until that ambition comes at the detriment of the wellbeing and livelihood of others.

Last week as we stood up here on the altar and Susan gave each of us, well *most* of us, candy to fill our cups, there was a noticeable imbalance in how much each person received. Some got full cups, some just a few pieces, and others (*points to self*) received nothing⁵. Receiving a full cup is in no way a sin- whether by working hard for that fullness, or by receiving it by chance, it is not inherently a burden to the person who received it. Beauty, fame, money, intelligence, visions of God's throne- none of these gifts alone are sinful, or bad, or withhold us from the need and presence of God. It is when we begin to see these gifts as rights only for ourselves, not to be shared or used for the wellbeing of God's kingdom (read: the whole of God's creation), that they hold us back from the goodness God is working through us.

So what do we do? Do we deny ourselves of this goodness? Are we to resist ambitiously pursuing goals and aiming to have the things we desire?

No. But we must do so in constant relationship with God.

We must continue to pursue the gifts God has given us. We have been given these opportunities for the pleasure of good things, and for the furthering of God's kingdom here on earth. We also have free will. God's kingdom is here, with our neighbors, the ones we love and don't love, and the purpose of our gifts is to make the here and now live fully into the manifestation of God's kingdom as lovingly as possible. Not putting our own desires above the good of the whole. Not attributing our goodness only to our own efforts. God made us, and we are good, and we are made better through love.

Amen.

1

Cultural Backgrounds Bible, pg. 2037, "Ancient Boasting and 2 Corinthians 11"

2

Cultural Backgrounds Bible, pg. 2039, "Paul's Experience of the 'Third Heaven'"

3

Job 1:12

4

Cultural Backgrounds Bible, pg. 2038, footnote 12:7

5

This was a children's sermon based on 2 Corinthians 8:7-15, whereas the illustration was meant to explain the concept of sharing abundance with those who had nothing: "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little."