

HAVING PROBLEMS

You may have noticed that there is no question mark in the sermon title. That's because there is no question about it. We all have problems. We have our own problems; we make other people's problems our problems. We love having problems. We just don't like it if they look too big to us. If they seem too threatening, or start to frighten us too badly, or give us the impression that they are beyond all solution, beyond all our resources, beyond all hope, then we begin to fall apart, get depressed, sink into despair – unless of course we have faith in God. Running into problems too big for us is what awakened most of us spiritually in the first place. Most of us do not get converted as long as we think we can handle, with our own resources, the problems coming at us. Why move out of the driver's seat as long as we think we have things under control? Not needing help is the essence of pride. And pride is the ultimate barrier between us and God. Or at least it has the reputation, in religious circles, for being the king of the Seven Deadly Sins, even though it is considered to be the highest virtue in secular circles: self-confidence, positive thinking, optimism. The world appreciates anybody who says "Hey, I can handle this," or "We can handle this together." They even teach people to say, "Hey, no problem."

But I'm way ahead of myself, to be on such themes so early in a sermon, don't you think? You are barely warming up your motors, and I sound like I'm getting ready to come down the homestretch.

Nice day we're having, isn't it? Have you been having a pleasant start to the new year? Mine has been chock-full of blessings – more so than any I can remember in a long time. Spent hours setting up my shop in the basement of our house; that's just one problem after another all day long, but those are problems I can handle, and more fun than a picture puzzle. Watched our house getting renovated from top to bottom; Mariana is handling all those problems. Several people I know and love are falling apart, and probably getting ready to put life together better than ever before, but you never know. Spent three days in the ICU at the hospital. Had a great wedding out on the beach at the end of the Olympic Peninsula. Headed back home from the wedding, alone in my car for two days – no phones, no computer – one of my favorite things. Seldom can I remember feeling more calm, more blessed, more quiet

within, more cared for by the Holy Spirit. And you know what? That was right in the middle of thoughts turned toward you, this church, all the things we are not that we should be, all the things and people I cannot keep up with. They did not matter less, they mattered more. But my shortcomings are not the whole reality; neither are yours. God is with us. Life is good despite its problems. It doesn't mean we "win" fame or success in this world. If it comes, it is a chimera; if it goes, nothing eternal is lost. But the Kingdom of God is in our midst, if Christ Jesus is in our midst. And the fullness of the Kingdom is still coming.

Darn, I just cannot seem to keep from putting the end of this sermon at the beginning. But that's okay – I'll put the beginning at the end.

So we have problems. We always will – even in eternity. And that's just fine, as long as we don't trade our faith back in for fear. So I don't want to talk this morning about whether or not we have problems, or how to get rid of all our problems. I want to talk about "having problems," as in: How do we deal with that? What does it mean to us?

This is a fascinating passage here in the twelfth chapter of Second Corinthians. Paul inadvertently gives us a major clue to the dating of his story. Assuming he is talking about a spiritual experience of his own, which I do, then it was fourteen years from the time he saw that light on the Damascus Road until the writing of this letter to the Corinthian church. It reminds us that Paul did not get converted one day and become a full-blown missionary/apostle the next. He spent eight or nine years in study and contemplation – reworking his whole life, and everything he had known and believed in his former life. Isn't that what's too frequently missing in the leaders of the church today, and perhaps all too often in our own lives? We want it fast and simple. Fast religion, like fast food, is appealing at the moment, but not really good for you – not truly nurturing, not healthy in the long run. We have only to read Romans, or any of Paul's letters, to realize that Paul was not handing out "fast religion." He had received his commission – his *vocatio* – on the Damascus Road, but it took him years to think and study and pray it through – to train and discipline himself for the task.

I hope some of us are in that very process right now. And of course, all the time that we are in that process, we feel frustrated, impatient, and sometimes even faithless. We should be "out there" ... we should be doing more ... we should be accomplishing more for our Lord. Never mind whether we know what we are doing, or how the Lord wants us

to do it; just be busy. You may think that's just the way of the world. But it is also Satan's best way to ruin authentic calling. How often do we need reminding? Next to lies, Satan's best tool is haste: You are not doing enough ... you are not doing it fast enough ... you are about to lose the very last opportunity on the face of the earth. If you were really faithful, you would be running around like a chicken with its head cut off – expending enormous energy, not really sure why, or for what. You better get out there fast, or God will know you don't really love him. "Actions speak louder than words." Yes, well, that's often very true of our frenetic, disorganized, scattered, exhausted lives. And what the actions are saying is that we do not yet trust or obey God. James says that faith without works is dead. (James 2:26) But the truth is, there is no such thing as faith that does not change our lives, our purposes, our values, our direction. But works without faith is the way of the world, and behind it Satan is always laughing.

This passage also reminds us that there was a great deal more to the Damascus Road experience than we are told in the Book of Acts. We are told there that Paul was blinded, and that he discovered that Jesus, whom he had despised as a fraud, was far greater than he had ever imagined. He also discovered that persecuting Jesus' followers was the same as persecuting Jesus. Paul also experienced grace and forgiveness beyond anything he had ever expected. Ananias welcomed him as a brother, and restored his sight. And thus we get one of the greatest conversion encounters in the history of the world. Here in this Corinthian letter, however, we discover that a good deal more was happening to Paul during that time than Acts told us about. It was not just "Hey, you're killing my people – stop it." Somewhere in the darkness of this world's blindness, Paul was seeing things far beyond this world. Caught up into Heaven – into Paradise – Paul was introduced to realities far beyond this world. He saw life and truth and realms beyond human language to describe or relate. And for the rest of his life, he would be living for and focused on realities that make this world seem but a dim shadow and a poor reflection of true Life. "*For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face-to-face.*" (I Corinthians 13:12)

Might we also notice Paul's perspective on his "thorn in the flesh." He sees, tastes, knows, and lives for the Kingdom. It is very real to him, far more real than what most people consider to be the world around them. So in that sense, Paul is already in the Kingdom. But he is not confused. He knows the Kingdom is not in its fullness here. He still

experiences the imperfections, pains, sorrows, animosities, and problems that go on in this realm. And so, of course, we are reminded of the amazing anger and conflict that surrounded his life wherever he went, getting him beaten, stoned, arrested, thrown in prison, hated – not just once, but over and over. In fact, he is so hated, his life begins to remind us of the life of Jesus Himself.

Paul is not surprised to find himself in an imperfect world – to find himself in the midst of problems. And here, in this passage, we discover that he lives with some physical disability, some physical pain, some problem that causes him constant discomfort, hampering his work, and focus, and peace. I won't get into the scholars' debate about whether it was poor eyesight or malaria or lameness or whatever. We don't know, and it doesn't matter. For the moment, suppose that his "thorn in the flesh" is the same as whatever *your* thorn is. If you do not have a thorn, you are too young to be fully conscious. Everyone has a "thorn in the flesh" – an ailment, an attitude, a personality trait – some flaw that constantly plagues us and throws us off track, if we allow it. Some of us are no doubt saying, "Here are ten or twelve – take your pick."

I remind you that Paul has enormous faith. Paul is even a faith healer whose reputation as such has spread far and wide. Paul knows that God is all-powerful, and that Jesus can accomplish anything He wants to. Moreover, Jesus had done him many personal favors, and would go on doing them all of Paul's life. But it didn't keep Paul from being beaten, stoned, arrested, thrown into prison, or roundly hated.

Anyway, this time Paul goes into prayer and asks that the thorn be removed. Couldn't he be more effective without this thorn? Doesn't he have enough to deal with, without this constant distraction? Doesn't Jesus love him? And I don't mean some picayune, mild little affection. I mean love beyond this world's comprehension – the full-Gospel kind of love, the kind that breaches sin and death and will carry Paul through all eternity despite anything this world or Satan or all the powers of darkness can do to threaten or undo him. Paul knows and trusts all this. So he goes to his prayers and asks that this thorn be removed.

Nothing. Was Paul surprised? Probably. Did this make any sense to him? Probably not. Well, maybe he didn't ask properly, or with enough humility, or with enough trust. So he tries a second time. Nothing again. "Come on, Lord. You've done it for lots of others. You've even used me to help lots of others. Isn't it my turn? I'm not trying to be selfish or

demanding or anything. I just need your help here. I just want to serve you better. Surely you don't want me to be suffering with this thing. Come on ... please?" So he asks a third time. Nothing.

Paul never asks again. We get no hint that he backed away from his trust in God, or that he backed away from his purpose, or that he cut back on any of his love, ardor, passion, obedience, or devotion. If any of this took place on the inside, we get no hint of it by watching his life. Let us be clear: Paul does *not* understand. He assumes there must be some reason, some benefit to his carrying this thorn in his flesh that he does not understand. He expects good to come out of it in some mysterious fashion – a deeper trust, a greater dependence, something. “You can use even my weakness – and maybe in some way I don't fully comprehend, it will make me more available for your power.” And certainly *we* do not understand either, except this appears to be exactly what happened. In any case, here we see one of the greatest saints of all time, begging God to heal him of an affliction ... and nothing happens. The televangelists don't always tell you about that part. They are afraid it will keep you from believing. But Christianity is not about believing. It is about trusting.

Unbelievably, Paul does not think he is in charge. His request is not a demand. He asks three times, then moves on. “Nuts to it – I'll live with it.” And he goes right back to being as faithful as he can possibly be. Go thou, and do likewise. Please: Never decide to live with a thorn until you have genuinely asked at least three times. Our Lord is a great and amazing healer. But if we ask three times and get nothing, it is time to move on despite anything and everything that is trying to hamper us.

That's a good place to stop. I wish I *could* stop. I'm probably going to get misunderstood pretty badly if I go on here. But I came here to go on.

We have problems. Sometimes they are serious. We need to take them to the Lord. But what I ask you to see and contemplate today is that many churches get focused on the problems until they can no longer be the church. And I ask you to help us to keep that from happening here.

When I became pastor in my first church, I was young and idealistic. Hard for you to imagine, I'm sure, but it was true. I wanted us to be the best and most faithful church New England had seen in a long time. A lot of the members were enthusiastic about my coming, and we got off to a happy start. They painted the parsonage, got a new desk for the

church study, and kept asking me what I needed. They “pounded” us when we arrived – an old New England custom where everybody shows up with a pound of this and a pound of that – until the refrigerator and the pantry were full. I started to preach on Sundays, the choir (though they couldn’t sing like ours) tried hard, and the church was full. Most everybody in town came to church in those days. There was nothing else to do – the “blue laws” were still in effect.

I soon learned, however, that the role of the pastor, in their minds, was clear, set, and very narrow. Preaching on Sunday was a must, but sermons should be simple, encouraging, inspirational – and not disturbing. Disturbing people was unloving. People came to church to feel good, maybe laugh a little, and be sent into a new week with refreshing reminders of good morals, good deeds, and good cheer. I was told that very clearly, a number of times. A pretty high number of times, actually.

When I was not preaching, working on the sermon, or attending parish meetings to keep the organization running smoothly, I should be “calling.” I should be calling on members, and on any friends and relatives of members, who were in the hospital. I should be calling at least twice a week on the list of “sick and shut-in” members. (The Deaconesses did that too, and there were some great Deaconesses there.) After that, I should be calling on the rest of the members in some regular and systematic fashion. You didn’t even have to make an appointment with them in those days – just drop in. Most of the time, people were home. Most of the time, they dropped whatever they were doing to talk for an hour or so. If it was an embarrassing or inconvenient time, that was just part of the expectation, and for the most part it was taken in good grace.

There was much that was charming about this pattern. There was much that I enjoyed about it. In any case, this was what was expected of me, and this was *all* that was expected of me – meaning, if I tried to get outside those parameters, there was trouble. For instance, it quickly became clear that the vast majority of the members of the congregation knew almost nothing about the Bible. There was some pretty good awareness of American history, especially New England history, but no awareness of church history, theology, or who Paul was, or Peter, or Jesus. Jesus was a vague, divine symbol of niceness, but people knew almost

nothing of His real life. And “prayer” was a good word, but in practice it was a shallow, brief, almost superstitious rite.

It seemed to me that we couldn’t become a real congregation – a true band of Christian pilgrims – unless we had more understanding of the Christian Life, and paid more attention to our role models. Meanwhile, the Cold War with Russia had everybody scared to death that we would blow each other up, the civil rights movement was heating up, Nixon and Kennedy were debating each other, and some people were saying that the church was irrelevant to the really important issues of the world. Of course, others were determined to keep it so.

Looking back, I suspect I had more support than I realized. Part of it was that I was a really good youth leader. I ran great youth groups for the first thirty years of my ministry, and it got me forgiven for a lot of other “sins.” The weird thing is, they let me do what I wanted with the youth groups. It was okay to corrupt the kids with the Christian Faith, as long as I didn’t try it on the adults. So the kids and I were having a great time, but the church was still stuck in la-la land, and that was not okay with me.

The truth is, you can preach forever and make very little dent in people’s lives. People have to get more involved than that. They have to start wrestling with the Bible themselves, and with the personal presence of Jesus, and with the great themes of the Christian Life. And best of all, they have to get into it with other brothers and sisters who are into it too. So I started inviting people into Bible Study groups, and I tried to start classes for those who needed more information before they could discover how fascinating the Christian Life really was.

So the church shut me down. I wasn’t supposed to be wasting my time on such frivolous affairs; I should be out calling. And of course they were right about one thing: You cannot do everything. You cannot preach, lead a good youth group, attend all the board and committee meetings, do twenty-three hours of counseling a week, attend all the social functions of a New England parish, do all the expected “calling” – and still have time to teach classes and lead Bible Study groups and prayer retreats. So they shut me down. “Get back to calling,” they said. In the end, they voted that I be forbidden to hold Bible Study groups in the church building. They owned it, they said, and from then on, Bible Study was not allowed or permitted in that church.

Of course, Bible Study went into the homes and got really great, but that's not the point. How does a Christian church get to the place where it doesn't want to study the Bible, or to know anything about Jesus or its faith, theology, history, tradition, or true purpose? I did not understand it at the time, but I have come to understand it since.

Jesus is power. Part of the legitimate appeal that draws people to Jesus and His church is the promise of a caring power that can help us. It is basic to evangelism – to the stories we tell: I came to Jesus and He helped me. I came to Jesus and He changed my life. Jesus has done so much for me, I wish you would come to Him too. Please, come get in on it. He loves you too.

I have no complaint with this except that we don't say it enough. Most of the time, with most of our problems, we never get to the third request before our Lord does wonderful things for us. Most of the time, He does not leave us with our thorns. The Lord does love us, and Jesus really does have power, and many are the miracles that surround our lives when we kill our pride and open ourselves to His mercy and love.

But from there, some churches evolve to the place where getting help with our own personal problems becomes the whole show. Especially with more successful churches, getting help with our problems evolves into getting help for everybody else's problems – and then into getting help for all the problems of the world. Eventually that becomes the only purpose or function of the Christian Faith. The path to this way of thinking can be subtle, but it is devastating to our Faith and purpose.

We can become so focused on all Jesus does for us that we think that's the whole story. But the truth is, Jesus comes to help us mostly by calling us into a different Life and Kingdom. Meaning, we are supposed to end up *living* for Him – spending our lives for His purposes. Life in Christ Jesus is not the same as having Jesus for our mascot. To be even more serious, Jesus as Healer is wonderful, but it is not the same as Jesus Lord and Christ. Jesus comes to us that we may *follow Him*. Over and over in the history of the church, we have left out that second part. And getting focused on the healing part is one of the classic ways to forget all about following Him. If the church gets focused on the favors Jesus can do for us, it is no longer the church. There is a difference between calling people into the Kingdom of Christ, and turning the church into a nursing station. Jesus changes lives! If we just want Him to comfort us, hold our hands, give us some aspirin, but leave us the

way we are, then that is not Christianity – and it most certainly is not the real church.

So if Jesus has the power to help me and others with our problems, we can be incredibly grateful, but we have to be careful not to let this become the test of authenticity. Otherwise, Jesus is soon being evaluated – judged – by how much He helps me and my friends. That is, He is only the true Savior if He heals ... me and my friends. If Jesus cannot solve my problems, what good is He? If Jesus cannot help all the poor, what good is He? If Jesus cannot solve the problems in the Middle East, what good is He? If anybody has a problem, let's apply Jesus (you know, like a mustard pack), and if we don't get the results we want, maybe He's not the Messiah after all ...

In our time, many liberal churches have become so focused on the problems that the problems have become all they are about. Who is sick? Who is in the hospital? Who is sad or grieving? Please note: The church is supposed to care about such things – but along THE WAY, not as the main event. I know many, many pastors whose entire lives are caught up in these problems as the only thing the church is about, and the only thing they have time for. They preach on Sunday (about compassion and love) and call on people during the week, and that's the whole show. If there are classes or programs beyond this, they are all about this superficial kind of caring, usually under the title of “love your neighbor.” There is little or nothing about giving your life to Christ ... about vocatio ... about studying the Bible ... about learning how to pray, or developing an active but obedient relationship with the Holy Spirit ... about a new Way of Life, or living to serve the Kingdom of Christ ... or even about spreading the Gospel. It rarely if ever occurs to such churches that “loving your neighbor” might involve wanting them to discover the New Life in Christ Jesus. Even less often does it occur to such churches that “neighbor love” sometimes means helping people get out of ways and patterns of living that don't work, that don't have any future, that are destructive and fruitless – and that they need the power of a Savior who can change the patterns themselves, at the core. *“You must be born anew.”*

The Cross and the Resurrection are about more than hospital visits, holding hands, patting each other on the head, telling each other sweet platitudes. Yet that's what even some of you think *this* church is supposed to be about, and that's what some of you think I should be spending all of my time doing.

The saddest thing, from my perspective, is that a church that gets focused and stuck in this pattern gets sicker and sicker, until sickness and problems are the only reality in its life. After a while, all the light and hope and glory are missing. They miss all that is most exciting about the Christian Life. There is more than one reason for why the liberal church has been dying for the last fifty years. But one of the reasons is that many of our churches have stopped the great adventure of following Christ, and have focused instead on sickness and personal problems. You cannot do that for very long without developing sick patterns. We are drawn toward what we focus on.

We have problems. We always will. Jesus will often help us with our problems, and sometimes way beyond all our expectations. But that is not what He is about – and therefore that cannot be what *we* are about. The church is a faith community that lives in and for Christ's Kingdom – in the here and now – no matter what's going on all around us. We seek to change our lives to match the Kingdom's values and purposes and goals. We know that none of this is possible except to the degree that each one of us is open to and developing our own personal relationship with the Holy Spirit of Jesus. This will call each of us into our own role and purpose within the Kingdom. When that happens, we will never live for each other; instead, alongside each other, we will live for Jesus the Christ.

And sometimes, like Paul, we end up with a thorn we cannot get rid of, and we don't understand why. Until, like Paul, we say, "Nuts to it – I'll live with it." Then we move on, hoping Christ will use even our weakness for His purposes.