

WHEN EVERYTHING IS REVEALED
ROMANS 8: 22-27

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He is one of those people who is defined by the size of his ego. He's obsessed with being number one. Never stops talking about being first in sales, first in his class, the best player on the company softball team, the best seats at the Bulls games, box seats at Comiskey Park.

One day recently this man's wife watched with interest as he stepped on one of those fortune-telling scales. He dropped a coin in the slot and out came a little card which read: "You are a born leader with superior intelligence, a quick wit and a charming manner. You have a magnetic personality and are attractive to the opposite sex."

"Read that," he said to his wife as he gloatingly handed her the card. She did, and then turned the card over. She handed it back: "It got your weight wrong too."

I went to college with a man like that. He used to brag, "When you're as good as I am, it's hard to be humble." We all know people like that' don't we? Boasting, bragging, striving to be number one and to let everybody know they are. And, truth to tell, such people make us uneasy. For two reasons. One is not only that they are overbearing but they are also usually very powerful, very articulate, and consequently they very often get their way. The other reason they make us uncomfortable is that we fear that our own egos can get unleashed, that our own pride and self-satisfaction are denials of what Jesus commands us to be and what His example shows us.

In Romans 8: 22-27, the apostle Paul foretells a future glory but is mindful of the "groaning" and "sighs" that belong to the "children of God" in the present age. Paul assures us that "the sufferings of this present time" are "not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us" (8:18). Paul is doing what any pastor has to do over and over again: navigate the choppy waters of now and not yet, of the present time and the time when all our plagues and fears will be conquered "through him who loved us."

Paul writes, "We hope for that which is not seen" and "we wait for it with patience." We are hopeful, but we are not patient.

Consider the destruction of hope in Illinois these days. I have lived in seven states, each one more corrupt than the last. Our uncaring, greedy and short-sighted legislators have passed a bill which will legalize video poker machines in restaurants, bars, VFW halls and American legion posts—some 46,000 of them. While Illinois has, thanks to the Illinois Gaming Board, the most comprehensive self-exclusion program for addictive gamblers so that they will not ruin their lives and the lives of their loved ones in our nine casinos, that will go out the window when any addict can walk into a bar or restaurant and throw her or his life away at video poker machine.

Moreover, the Mob owns and manufactures most of those machines, and the Gaming Board's work—it is one of our smallest state agencies—will increase a hundred fold. The technology of tracking the machines will be incredible. Hope is being destroyed for thousands of our citizens.

We know what it's like to pray for God to remove whatever we would call our own personal thorn in the flesh. We know what it's like to ask God to deliver us from struggle and conflict and misunderstanding. What we don't hear from God as the apostle did-- because we're not willing to hear it--is the promise that "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." We don't believe that. Since we want power over others, which in itself is a form of greed, and we want everyone to know how powerful we are, we cannot abide weakness. Moreover, we don't pray in a fashion that even allows us to hear God. Prayer for us is so often talking, asking, trying to say so much even to God that we can hide behind our words. There is a reason God gave us one mouth and two ears, and we should remember that fact when we pray. Read your Gospels and pay attention to the prayer life of Jesus. God speaks to Jesus because he allows time to listen to God

Moreover, we get grace all mixed up with good fortune. When good things happen to us, we attribute it to our deserving. After all, we're good people, we try to live good lives, we try to do what's right, so when God blesses us, it's because God is wise. We must be doing something right. When good fortune happens to others, however, we attribute it to "dumb luck." We have a hard time with Our Lord's maxim that "God's rain falls on the just **and** the unjust."

To say "There but for the grace of God go I" can be one of the cruelest statements we can make. The phrase assumes the absence of grace in someone else's life. It turns grace into a trick that God plays, and it assumes that God sees things exactly the way we do.

If anything, grace teaches us the opposite. When I look at my life, I am amazed at God's grace. My spiritual math collapses. I have received more than I ever deserve, and I get more than I can ever give. And even in saying that, I know that I am self-righteous and

judgmental and that only God's grace saves me from even deeper hypocrisy.

You see, God's grace teaches us, as it taught even Jesus, that we are not in control. When we put our lives into God's economy instead of ours, every part of our lives becomes an encounter with God. Oh, I would like to manage everything. After all, when you're as smart as I am, why shouldn't God give you a bit more control. Only that is not the way things turn out. God never seems to surrender to me.

But, as Barbara Brown Taylor has so wonderfully stated it, "The struggle is important, because giving into grace is not a matter of accepting things as they are. It is, instead, the dogged will to recognize God in the midst of all that is, the so-called good and the so-called bad."

I've recounted before Reynolds Price's struggle with cancer as he wrote about it in *A Whole New Life*. After months of surgery, radiation, unspeakable pain and progressive paralysis, he lay in his bed staring at the ceiling. "How much more do I have to take?" he asked the God who he says remains for him "the last unchangeable bafflement." There was a long pause before he received his answer. "More," said a voice, neither male nor female, addressing him as clearly as someone sitting beside his bed. And more his what he got: more surgery, more pain, more paralysis. But also more love, more patience, more life--a whole new life--full of the "now appalling, now astonishing grace of God."

Nobody revels in suffering. Nobody welcomes pain and agony. Yet, like St. Paul, we know what it is to pray for God to remove the thorns in our flesh: a difficult person who harasses us, an untenable situation at work, a continuing malady, the aches and pains of aging, the difficulties of relationships, the economic circumstances that awaken us in the night with a jolt. Or just that nameless dread, worry, fear, angst that will not let go of our lives.

And yet. The answer to our prayer--if we will listen--often comes back to us in the same words as those spoken to the apostle: "My grace is sufficient. It is in weakness that my power is revealed." It's not the answer we want, because our culture continually lies to us that there are simple, easy answers to difficult questions. But the Bible, as realistic a book as you will ever read, says just the opposite: life is difficult, answers are hard to come by, and the only way we will ever understand them is to trust in God.

There is a story from Mepkin Abbey near Charleston, South Carolina that I want to tell you. Brother John was a monk in a Benedictine monastery. His job, his calling was washing dishes and cleaning up after the community meals. That's where his abilities met the needs of the world, and thus, according to Augustine's dictum, he felt called. But one day a new abbot came to the monastery and the abbot decreed that every member of the

faith community would take his turn at preaching. Brother John had never preached, didn't want to, didn't know how. But the abbot insisted. "Next Sunday is your turn. Preach."

So John mounted the pulpit. His heart was about to leap out of his throat, his palms were dripping sweat, his voice was hoarse, his armpits felt like peanut butter. He croaked, "Does anybody know what I'm going to say?" With one voice, the other monks replied, "No!" John said, "God will reveal it. Go in peace."

The abbot was not pleased. "Brother John," he said, "you are going to have to do better than that. Next Sunday you will preach again." Same thing: thumping heart, dry mouth, sweat rolling off him, John went into the pulpit. "Does anybody know what I'm going to say?" This time they responded, "Yes!" "Well, then," said Brother John, "there's no need for me to tell you. Go in peace."

Once more the abbot was not pleased. The third try put John before the sea of faces and he suffered the identical feelings as before. Same question: "Does anybody here know what I'm going to say?" Half the congregation responded, "Yes!" The other half said, "No!" Suddenly Brother John's anxiety dissipated. With an air of authority he had never before exhibited, he said, "Then let those who know tell those who don't know."

The abbot was ecstatic. "That was one of the best sermons I have ever heard," he said.

Some of us know. Others come do not know. Some are sure in our faith, others are searching. Some know a God of gentleness and kindness, others are assaulted in the darkness by God and live in a pit of despair.

When Joseph Fort Newton came to the end of his active ministry, he summed up his five decades of preaching:

My message has been very simple. To live well we must have a faith to live by, a self to live with, and a work to live for--something to which we can give ourselves and thus get ourselves off our hands.

We cannot tell what may happen to us in this strange medley of life. But we can decide what happens in us--how we take it, what we do with it--and that is what really counts in the end.

Life is an adventure of faith, if we are to be victors over it, not victims of it. Faith in the God above us, faith in the infinite soul within us, faith in life and in our fellow-souls--without faith, the plus quality, we cannot live.

God's grace is not fulfilled as we experience it in our own lives. It is not real until we live it out and give it away.