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Sexagesima
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2 Corinthians 11:19-12:9
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

My pastor didn't give me a Confirmation verse, so I chose for myself this one. It's not included in our Epistle lesson, but it follows immediately after and concludes the thought. So, because I like this verse and, more importantly, because it goes so well with the lesson, I want to share it with you this morning.

For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

I know it's kind of an odd verse for Confirmation. Then again, I never claimed not to be odd. In fact, I think most pastors are pretty odd. St. Paul says that God uses "earthen vessels" or "jars of clay" as His preachers "to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us" preachers. Pastors, he says, are, among other things, "afflicted in every way, but not crushed" (2Co 4:7-8). That's why I'll sometimes translate "earthen vessels" as "cracked pots" instead. Maybe not the most sanctified translation, but it's clearly evident.

If you'll indulge this "cracked pot" this morning, I'd like to tell you why I chose this verse—and I'll maybe even tie it into our lesson.

When I first heard this verse, I had just started attending Faith Lutheran Church. I was learning about grace as a free gift, like in last week's Gospel about the workers in the vineyard. Forgiveness that was simply given and not earned by doing something to make it right was a completely new experience. God's Word and its absolute power to change hearts and minds, like in our parable of the sower, was revolutionary. At the same time, my relationship with my girlfriend of three years was miserable. My mom was sick with Lou Gehrig's disease and my dad was eating Tums like they were candy. I was away from home. I didn't have a car. A really good friend had suddenly stopped talking to me and moved out. I felt lonely, isolated, and pretty worn down and weak most of the time.

Surely, the insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities I experienced were nothing compared to what St. Paul went through. I might've scoffed "First-World problems" if that

had been a thing last millennium. But, then again, how many of us have gone through anything close to what St. Paul went through? Not a one of us, I imagine. Does that mean our hurts and sufferings don't matter? Should they be dismissed? The apostle writes to the Corinthians, "[God] will not let you be tempted beyond your ability" (1Co 10:13). But is the opposite also true? Could it mean that we are tempted to the edge of our ability? If so, is each one of us bearing under just as much as we can handle? If so, should we ever despise another's suffering no matter how insignificant or trivial it may seem?

Yet, St. Paul says he's "content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities." Are you content with your weaknesses and such? Are you satisfied with your sufferings? After all, that's what contentment is. It's to find satisfaction, pleasure, and thanksgiving—what we might call happiness. The song is "Don't Worry, Be Happy" and not "Be Happy with Your Worry," right? Of course! Happiness is being free from worry and hardship. Happiness is pleasure in one's situation.

Our society's goal is happiness as being without pain or suffering. Most certainly, almost everything we do with medicine and psychology has to do with alleviating pain. Just take a pill or go on a diet or have a surgery and you'll feel better or have those bad thoughts taken away. Same with all manner of businesses, right? Buy this, take this, drink this, snort this, do this thing, come to this place—your life will be better and you won't have to worry about those other things. We're so focused on happiness as freedom from suffering, we've even enshrined it as a God-given, unalienable right.

But St. Paul beholds his weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities and derives satisfaction from them. He knows he will suffer. There's no question about that. Suffering comes to all people—including those who hear the Word of God, receive it with joy, and believe it and are saved. The good soil, Jesus says, are those who "hold [God's Word] fast in an honest and good heart" (Lk 8:15). They, like the rocky soil, experience times of testing, but they hold fast. Also, like thorns, they have the cares and riches and pleasures of life, but they endure and bear fruit with patience. Testing and thorns—sounds like suffering to me.

St. Paul—and also you and I—can find contentment with suffering, as he begins the verse, "for the sake of Christ." Christ is the key. The apostle's lineage and qualifications, and his labors and hardships don't matter. Oh, St. Paul still remembers them. He knows exactly

how many times he was whipped and beaten and stoned—he tells us. He hasn't forgotten those three times he was shipwrecked. But they don't matter because he has something greater than his sufferings: Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Jesus took on St. Paul's weaknesses—all of them, even making Himself to be a helpless baby in Mary's arms. He was no less helpless before the High Priest Caiaphas and Judea's governor, Pontius Pilate. Moreover, Jesus' own suffering was deeper and more profound than any other suffering. If suffering comes as a result of sin, and Jesus took upon Himself all the sin of all people who had ever and will ever live, then His suffering is mind-blowingly beyond comprehension.

So, am I implying that Jesus' sufferings make all our sufferings—including St. Paul's—insignificant in comparison? Not at all. It's not about comparing; it's not about who's suffered more. "For the sake of Christ" isn't about Christ's suffering being greater. Rather, "for the sake of the Christ" is about Christ's promises. You see, sufferings and trials and testing aren't God's proper work—that's all under the Law. No, "for the sake of Christ" is about promise and life and salvation—that's all Gospel.

In our lesson, after St. Paul prays "three times" (three times because three is a perfect number and nothing was lacking in his prayer) God answers Him with a promise: "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness." It's the promise of grace and power—God's grace and power for him—in which St. Paul trusts and upon which he relies. St. Paul beholds Christ in His sufferings on the cross and then recalls the same Jesus who was crucified standing before him in glory on Damascus road. It's the promise of the risen Christ to which St. Paul clings.

It's the same for us. We know that, because of our weaknesses, we cannot be justified before God by our own strength or works. Rather, we are freely justified for the sake of Christ through faith in His promise. He has promised that we are received into divine favor and that our sins are forgiven for the sake of Christ. Christ has made sufficient satisfaction for our sins by His death. We are saved in our weaknesses by Christ's power and might and strength to save. "Little ones to Him belong; They are weak, but He is strong."

Because we have His precious and faithful promise of salvation, we can trust that our sufferings—and how they show our weaknesses—that our sufferings aren't mere punishment for sin. Instead, we know that they are for our good: "for My power is made

perfect in weakness.” And elsewhere St. Paul writes, “for those who love God all things work together for good” (Rm 8:28). Therefore, I can proclaim confidently to you that God uses your sufferings for your good and for the good of others—just as He used Christ’s sufferings for the good of all people. God uses them to grow you in the faith, to increase your reliance in His promises, and to mature you in love toward others. Because Jesus has rescued us with His sufferings and death and because His resurrection is a promise of our own, we can have joy. In fact, St. Paul writes, “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rm 5:3-5).

The Holy Spirit gives us hope, character, endurance, and joy in the midst of our sufferings. Can the world offer hope? It offers an end of suffering with a syringe full of poison. Is that hope? How about character? Look at the people praised for their “greatness.” King Herod was called “Great” too, and he had no problem with the slaughter of Bethlehem’s baby boys. Even the best of us must stand beside us and confess, “I, a poor, miserable sinner.” Endurance and patience and waiting are a thing of the past. Instant gratification is what we want. “I want it all, and I want it now” sang one of this world’s great prophets. And, as we said before, this world peddles happiness instead of joy.

Joy doesn’t exist apart from suffering. Rather, joy opposes and battles suffering. Joy exists in defiance of suffering. We rejoice despite the suffering. And when I talk about joy, I’m speaking as the Bible speaks, as Dr. Luther writes. Joy is laughter and dancing and leaping and frolicking. Joy is exuberance and excitement. Joy is what we display at wedding receptions and when our team wins the big game. Joy is whooping and hollering. Joy, that fruit of the Holy Spirit, is our whole life as Christians. It’s what allowed the psalmists and prophets to rejoice even as they lamented. It’s what leads us through the valley of the shadow of death to the promised green pasture beside still waters. And we have joy because of Jesus’ saving and self-giving work in His death and resurrection.

The weakness of God is stronger than men (1Co 1:25). So, instead of relying on my strength, I rely on God’s—and then I am thereby strong in the Lord. That’s what St. Paul means in the last bit of the verse when he says, “For when I am weak, then I am strong.” It’s His strength that we need. No one else is even close to being strong enough to save. And

with His strength, God has saved us for the sake of Christ. We know He loves us and smiles upon us. We trust in His promise of life in the midst of our sufferings—especially in the midst of our sufferings and weaknesses—and we still hold fast to His joy.

In Jesus' name.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus + to life everlasting.