

When Our Body is All Thumb 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

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Redlands First United Methodist Church
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On the church calendar, today is the Sunday to focus upon the Magi who recognized God as incarnate in Jesus the child. However, we focused upon the presence and presents of the Magi last Sunday. Today, for our first worship celebration together in the New Year, we are focusing upon the incarnation of God into the world again, but this time, into every body temple--that is, yours and mine.

If you were hammering a nail into a wall and missed the nail, hitting your thumb with the full force of your swing, your thumb would hurt. Hurt badly. For a while, as your thumb throbs, your body would be “all thumb.” That is, nothing else that was of concern a moment ago—nothing else that was even a great concern a moment ago—would matter. Your entire awareness would be thumb, hurting thumb.

Years ago someone said to me, “When the thumb hurts, the body is all thumb.” The person could just as well have said, “When the toe hurts, the body is all toe,” or “When the elbow hurts, the body is all elbow.”

In other words, when some part of us hurts badly, we are completely absorbed in that pain; our awareness flows to that hurt—for a while. Of course this is true of all dimensions of ourselves. If we lose a job, we’re all “job.” If we lose a friend, we are all “lonely”—for a while.

After the throbbing pain stops, we may remember that our nose is dripping; we need a tissue—we had forgotten about that for 15 minutes. In another dozen minutes, we might be “all thumb” again—this time animatedly telling the story about our hitting our thumb. We’re “all thumb” again—not out of pain, but sort of boasting about our having endured it. A year after we have lost a job or friend, if we have recovered and found a new job or friend, we may spend some time focusing upon our loss again, this time naming how we got through that period.

It’s hard to put ourselves into perspective. We need to pay attention to ourselves, to be self-aware, to take care of ourselves. But we can also be preoccupied with ourselves so that we begin to wonder if we’re too preoccupied, too self-centered. Another pastor once asked aloud: “Am I a hypochondriac if I never *mention* my concerns to others?”

Paul, in this passage in 2 Corinthians is a very clever speaker. Paul manages to **not boast** about his wonderful spiritual experiences, yet to tell everyone about them, then **to boast** about his weakness. Paul never met Jesus in person. Paul became a Christian after Jesus’ death. However, Paul was called—on the famous Damascus Road—to follow God through following Christ. In the letter Christine read, Paul wanted the Corinthians to accept his authority as an apostle of Christ—even though he had not met Jesus. Since Paul had very grand spiritual visions, he thought those should succeed in persuading the Corinthians that Paul had authority—but to **boast** about one’s spiritual qualities he thought would be a weakness. So, Paul cleverly plays a fool and then boasts—in third person...much like Lance Armstrong used to talk about the “Yellow Jersey winning the

stage.” Lance himself was wearing the Yellow Jersey, but it sounded boastful to say, “I won the stage,” so he said “the Yellow Jersey won it.”

Paul says it’s been fourteen years since he’s had those spiritual visions, but he hadn’t told anyone about them before. He’s telling the Corinthians now, in third person, to point out that he’s not using those visions to claim authority. You see, the people have to know he had the visions in order to know that he’s not boasting about them! To gain points in their eyes for not boasting about the visions, the people inadvertently learn that he had them. See how clever Paul was?

In reading this letter to the people at Corinth, we get the impression that while the visions prodded Paul to pursue his ministry, it was another aspect of Paul’s life that was giving him a special kind of strength.

His thumb.

That is, his weakness--whatever it was that was Paul’s “thorn in the flesh.”

We have no clue what that thorn in his flesh was. Some say maybe epilepsy, others conjecture it was perhaps depression or headaches, or an eye problem or stuttering... We do not know.

For a short while, it seems, Paul had become “All thorn.” He had to deal with his weakness. But, then, Paul found that he gained spiritual strength as he dealt with the physical problem. Surprising? His pain would end up giving him more spiritual strength—and really authority—than a vision of the third level of heaven. In fact, he could boast about his weakness precisely because through that weakness he did gain strength.

Sounds a lot like Lance Armstrong. He was an incredible athlete, would have been no matter what. Then he had cancer and worked with all his might to overcome that “thorn in his flesh.” And, he was healed. He would not boast of his athletic abilities. But he could create a foundation and boast of his gaining strength through his weakness.

If plastic was around when Paul was gaining strength through his weakness, perhaps he would have thought of selling yellow bracelets to help others with the same weakness find ways to improve their lives.

Look around at each other. You probably see _____ who plays piano so well, _____ with the great smile, _____ who speaks so kindly all the time. You see things about others that you would, if you were them, easily boast about. But, we all know that under the skin, at least a quarter of us are “all thumb,” “all lung,” or “all worry” right now. Some part of us is inflamed so that it’s hard to think of other things.

In an autobiography I read, the author commented, “It does a dog good to have a few fleas now and then. It keeps him from worrying so much about being a dog.”

That’s an interesting twist. When we become all thumb because we’ve just hit our thumb with the full force of a hammer, we have pain. We’re preoccupied with that pain. Whether so and so loves us quite as much as we love so and so or whether we’re getting paid enough at work is just not in our thoughts at that moment. The thumb pain numbs all our other concerns. In a peculiar way the thumb problem becomes a temporary solution to our other problems.

Some have said the same thing in another way: if we want to get rid of all of our problems, we can wear shoes that are too tight. Then we won’t think about our problems much, for we’ll be preoccupied with the pain of our toes.

A woman psychotherapist who specialized in helping people deal with chronic pain and who has a number of severe physical problems and much pain of her own shared with me some of her struggles with how much to share and how much to keep quiet about pain or problems. She said it is “difficult not to play the ‘pain Olympics’” even with friends, but then said that much talking about one’s pain often escalates into interactions that are not helpful for anyone. Yet, she also said that she went for two whole years without ever mentioning her pain and, though her pain did actually diminish, perhaps in part because she was not talking about it, she became very lonely. As she said, “No one knows you. You cut off all possibilities of letting some people know you.” So, her well-tested and wise conclusion was that for her it is best to discuss the pain with only a few chosen people and to limit the amount of time she spent talking about it.

I believe that God is incarnate--inside and around all of us, in our bodies and our relationships. Though life is basically good; life is also ambiguous--a mixture of blessings and not-so-good-stuff. When we have “weaknesses” or “thorns in our flesh” we need to face them, to deal with them, not to deny their existence. They cause us a combination of worry, hope, courage, fear, and faith...Our weaknesses or problems, while we have them, help us to bond with a common humanity, knowing that almost all of us carry some burden. Our problems may keep us humble and give us perspective, for we might have, like Paul, great spiritual visions or have a huge intellect or a great job, but also have an area of weakness. Our weaknesses or problems or pain may sometimes even enable us to have a really strong faith or a strong enjoyment of life, for we have faith or joy *in spite of* ...

In spite of _____ I am really rather healthy.

In spite of _____ life is really enjoyable.

The point of all this: Though life is filled with the presence of the Holy, it is also ambiguous, a mixture of light and shadows. Most of us will have some weakness at some time in our lives--it may be a physical problem or perhaps a relational one. These can and should preoccupy us for a while. We need to take care of ourselves--our bodies and our relationships. I do not think that God gives us problems for spiritual growth. However, if we’re open to it, God probably helps us to *be aware* of pain in our bodies or our relationships so that we WILL be preoccupied enough to get help or to find solutions. In contending with a weakness, we are often surprised to gain inner strength. That inner strength helps us to deal with our weakness, but even more of a surprise, the strength sometimes carries over into other parts of our living as well. We may become stronger in ways we had not ever expected.

Paul exemplifies one who experienced the heights of spiritual joy and the depths of some kind of problem. With God’s help he somehow integrated the two aspects of this ambiguous life to find himself strong--not only “in spite of” his “thorn,” but also “because of” his joy.

May 2010 be one filled with joy for each of us, and for all around the world. In any corner of our world that throbs for attention, may we make a huge New Year’s Resolution to put all in perspective and live together from a deep inner strength.