



## *Round Hill Community Church*

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**Sermon: July 5, 2009**

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**Of Thorns and Roses, Shannon A. White**

2 Corinthians 12: 2-10

I don't often begin sermons with jokes...partly because I'm not very good at telling them...but I'll give it a try. Billy Graham was going to the airport and his limousine driver pulled up to his house. Billy approached the driver saying, "I've always wanted to drive a limo...would you please let me drive it? You can sit in the back." The driver agreed, and soon Billy was cruising on the highway but with too heavy a foot. A State Trooper pulled him over. But upon seeing who it was driving, the young trooper excused himself and called his superior. "Sir, I know we give special treatment to important people. I've just pulled over a very important person." "Is it the Governor?" asked the superior? "No, more important than that," replied the trooper. "Is it the President?" "No sir, he's more important than that," said the trooper. "Well then who is it?" the superior officer demanded. "I think it's Jesus because he has Billy Graham as a chauffeur!"

It's important in these days to keep a sense of humor isn't it? Because it seems as though there are more stories in the news these days of people deeply disturbed...

Here in the US...On Monday, Bernard Madoff was sentenced to 150 years in prison... a small token of solace to thousands of investors who have lost billions in what has been called the worst financial scam in history.

Then there's the governor of South Carolina who lied to his family and his state over his whereabouts so he could go over the Father's Day weekend to be with his mistress in Argentina. And on top of that, when confronted by those both in and out of his own political party, he made a biblical reference, comparing himself to King David who continued to lead after having an affair with Bathsheba.

You've got utter fascination with the sudden death of Michael Jackson...rightly named the King Of Pop...but who was also haunted by multiple charges of child molestation. A man so tormented during his life, that the amount of prescription medication in his possession was enough to stock a pharmacy.

Then you've got a doctor who performed abortions, shot in the middle of a worship service, and a Kentucky pastor who invited his congregation last weekend to bring their guns to church in support of their constitutional right to bear arms.

You've got a church in Bridgeport just down the road which made national news over performing a gay exorcism...trying to make a gay man straight.

The New York State Senate and Assembly can't stop the in-fighting over a power struggle long enough to pass legislation that is costing New York taxpayers millions by the day.

And the fears of terrorism still pervade the thoughts of many as they interact with immigrant populations. Just last week I did a news story about the struggles one community in Putnam County is facing. In the small town of Brewster, some vocal white residents are angry over the increasing number of illegal Latino immigrants who are coming to live in their town. Then, it all came to a head when several weeks ago, an illegal immigrant from Guatemala was drunk and driving without a license when he tragically struck and killed a white woman and her 8-year-old daughter coming out of a dance class.

I then covered a news conference held by a group called "9/11 Families for a Secure America." One of the speakers lost his son who had worked for Cantor Fitzgerald on the day that would change our nation's lives forever. In referring to the situation on the streets of Brewster, he made a pitch to get rid of all illegal immigrants saying, "He might be the next drunk driver who kills your children, or the next pedophile or the next 9/11 terrorist." "Are you saying that the men standing on the streets waiting for employment are possible terrorists?" I asked. "You just don't know," he replied with a mysterious but stern look.

We're living in a time when many people are living in fear... but it seems as though the volume of pain, fear and powerlessness has been turned up in these last six months.. With the markets still unstable and massive amounts of jobs still being lost, albeit at a slower rate, even those to whom we have looked as leaders and anchors of society are continuing to fall by the wayside.

And the unrest exists around the globe too... take the recent coup in Honduras with factions at war with one another, and major repercussions are being felt as a result of the claim of unjust elections in Iran. North Korea also in the news regularly, keeps testing the waters to see just how far they can go with nuclear testing before anyone reacts.

Every person has their "stuff". The true test of a person and a measure of their faithfulness, though, is who they turn out to be when the tough times come, right?

The Apostle Paul was a man who had everything...first as a Pharisee and then as an apostle. He says, life was so good that he could boast, but to keep him from being too conceited, "a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too conceited." He says he asked God three times to remove this thorn...but God did not take it away and answered him, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' Paul continues...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."

This passage tells me several things...first, the thorn in Paul's side was NOT given by God...instead, God USED the hardships to show Paul and others the power of God's love and grace....and the result was a sense of humility in Paul that shaped his ministry.

Secondly, the torment, insults, persecutions and calamities to which Paul is referring are NOT as a result of his personal or character flaws necessarily, but a result of what happened to him while he was doing ministry.

Theologians have long guessed at what the "thorn" in Paul's side might be...some say it was some infirmity, like epilepsy or some cronic condition... Others guess that it was the people who opposed Paul during his ministry...those who beat him and put him in jail, who tried to hinder his ministry. But whatever the case, the

Greek form of the word thorn is equal to the magnitude of something upon which people were impaled in those days. In other words, this was something that could have been debilitating, and yet Paul continued on in his ministry with grace.

I know someone else who exemplified such grace. I have referred to my former colleague when I was at a church in Scarsdale, and dear friend ....a tall, smart, handsome, very intelligent man and pastor, with lots of charisma. The son and grandson of Presbyterian ministers in Southern California, made him a golden boy in the church destined to be slick...but that was not to be his path. During the summer after his first year in seminary at Princeton, he and his new bride were driving back across the country to California. They were hit in a head-on automobile collision. His young wife was killed. He returned to seminary in that Fall. The next summer, when he was traveling in the Swiss Alps, a messenger was sent to bring him down from the mountaintop to tell him both of his parents had been killed in a plane crash. While those losses might have destroyed many, Bob chose to let this adversity season him as a man of faith. I'm sure there were many times when he argued with God... asking "Why?" but that didn't stop him from moving forward....Bob was centered and as a result, he became very real and compassionate...an excellent minister. While in Scarsdale, he received his PhD in diaspora Judaism from the University of Minnesota. He became a scholar of Jewish/Christian relations and was sought after as a scholar on local, national and international levels. He has done and continues to do much to heal relations between the Jewish and Christian communities. Bob is not without his flaws, and he would still go on to face excruciating thorns of adversity later on as the leader of that congregation before leaving Scarsdale. But the impact of his ministry continues even now at Princeton Seminary...the effects of which will never fade.

But what if the interpretation of thorns in Corinthians as a "negative" is wrong? I'm not much of a gardener, but I love roses. In preparation for this sermon, I did a little research, since there is reference to thorns...and found that the sharp protrusions that cause pain when you reach out to grab a rose stem are NOT thorns...they are actually "prickles," outgrowths of the epidermis. I had always thought that the rose was a perfect juxtaposition of life...that beauty and pain are often coupled together...but not so with the rose. You see the prickles on a rose, while they may serve to keep browsing animals away they actually HELP the roses. According to Wikipedia, "Rose prickles are typically sickle-shaped hooks, which aid the rose in hanging onto other vegetation when growing over it." In some species which grow near the ocean they can act to "trap wind-blown sand and so reduce erosion and protect their roots."

In other words, what may be interpreted by some to make the rose no as pleasing, actually is there to PROTECT and preserve the rose and to help it thrive so it may provide more beauty in its blooms.

There's a true story on the website Youtube about a high school senior named Ben Comen from Anderson, South Carolina. Ben had been on the Cross Country team since he was in the 8th grade. Every morning Ben would leave the house before dawn to run. It was his passion...even though his body was riddled with Cerebral Palsy. His stiff legs made it difficult to run every step of the 3.1 mile course...but Ben was a true competitor. And when he was young, he had always wanted to be on a team, but no team would ever take him on, until he approached Chuck Parker's Cross Country team.

It took Ben twice as long as other runners to run the course. Ben would often be alone and was scared he would fall and not be able to get up again. But soon, he would find that he was not alone...members of the team and others who loved him would come back after finishing their own race and run behind him until he finished...helping him up whenever he fell, often covered with mud from head to toe.

Ben faced great odds, but the gift that he gave not only that coach, and the other team members but any-

one who witnessed the spirit of true teamwork...was something you could not measure.

In *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, authors Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham say the key to keeping hold of ourselves amid turbulent times is to keep a sense of humor about ourselves... it's really about seeing the thorns in our rose-filled lives as mere prickles.... They say "If we can accept the reality of our imperfection, the fact that we are put together funny, that we are, by our very nature, limited and thus do not have control over our lives, we are taking the tentative steps that are all we can take on the pilgrimage that is spirituality. Once we accept the common denominator of our own imperfection, once we begin to put into practice the belief that imperfection is the reality we have most in common with all other people, then the defenses that deceive us begin to fall away, and we can begin to see ourselves and others as they really are." (*Spirituality of Imperfection* p.242)

Actress Mary Tyler Moore, TV darling of the 1960's and 70's once said... "None of us gets out of here without pain." She knows what she's talking about...three marriages, a son who killed himself, a bout with Alcoholism that left her with Diabetes...yet still she is able to face her God with a sense of peace and her world in service. You might say...she sees those things which might appear to be thorns as prickles...and she moves on and through life helping others as a National spokeswoman for Diabetes.

None of us DOES get out of here without pain...we all have our stuff...the question is...how do we view it?