

What Paul's thorn in the flesh taught him (14B) (2 *Corinthians* 12:2-10)

## **We could see Paul's caveats about his ecstatic experiences as false humility. But then he shows solidarity with the human condition.**

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This passage is classic Paul. He fully displays the qualities that make him admirable or annoying, or both at the same time.

He toggles between saying he will not boast and then boasting about "the exceptional character of the revelations" he has received. As if one could have an ordinary, ho-hum ascent to Paradise and vision of God—the *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, explains that in mystical Judaism this is what happens in the third heaven.

We could see Paul's caveats about his ecstatic experiences as false humility. But then he shows solidarity with the human condition. His thorn or splinter in the flesh keeps him from becoming haughty, exalting himself above others. It teaches him not only that power is made perfect in weakness but that God's grace is sufficient for him.

Earlier in this letter to the Corinthians (in last Sunday's reading), Paul provides a theological rationale for a mutual aid project. This meditation on power and weakness is a reminder along similar lines: however much or little outward power any of us has, we are still vulnerable.

In a society that promotes independence and individualism, many of us find it easier to care for the needs of others than to have the situation reversed. Paul's thorn in the flesh has taught him that we can't begin healing until we recognize our afflictions. We can't be made whole until we recognize we are in pieces. We can't receive power until we recognize our weakness.

I'm researching and writing [a book about an innovative congregation](#) in Washington, D.C., that began in 1965, called the Community of Christ. I'm reading books that were influential to its early leaders, including George W. Webber's *The Congregation in Mission*, published in 1964 based in large part on his experiences with the [East Harlem Protestant Parish](#). Webber and the parish were part of what historian [Mark Wild calls the renewal movement in the mainline](#), which was active after World War 2 until the 1970s in US cities.

"Too often, eager Christians have insisted in the world that they brought to the situation ready-made answers to the complex problems of society," Webber writes. To him, taking the incarnation seriously means asking how our faith guides us to address the problems that affect all people. Christians are not lifeguards, Webber argues, safe and dry on the side of the water, throwing out flotation devices. Instead, we are "also swept along by the flooding currents of life" and in need of rescue by Christ as much as anyone else in danger of drowning.

As we strive to act for social justice, we'd do well to ask ourselves if we have a thorn in the flesh to keep us from exalting ourselves above others. Once we've identified it, we may have a better understanding of our own power and weakness, and of the opportunities we have to receive power from Christ to confront difficulties in the world.