

There's always this road bump in what we consider to be our perfect plan. We have a wonderful vacation lined up, then a storm cancels a flight. We're looking forward to enjoying our golden years, then a sudden medical issue brings about hospitalization. We want to go to church, but then we can't sleep the night before and oversleep our alarms.

Perhaps it's something more serious and chronic. An addiction to alcohol, drugs, or pornography has alienated you from family and friends. You just can't shake it. You have battled a mental disorder such as depression, PTSD, anxiety, or bipolar from before you can remember, and feeling topsy turvy like that has become the new normal. Perhaps you struggle with body image and wish the you staring back at you in the mirror was somehow different. Perhaps you're lonely. "Pastor, if you only knew how much time I spend sitting alone talking to nobody, then maybe you'd understand."

What is your ailment that you say to yourself, "If only this was gone, then I could live the life I wanted." That ailment is the thorn needling your side. Paul writes, **"So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me."**

Now, many scholars have speculated on what ailment Paul faced. Some suppose that Paul being harassed by a messenger of Satan means it was some kind of demonic oppression. Martin Luther certainly wrote a lot of his battles with the devil. Others suppose that the thorn could have been a difficult person in one of his congregations. More convincing yet could be that Paul faced a bodily ailment. He mentions writing with big letters and in another place he said that the church in Galatia would have gouged their eyes out and given them to him. Maybe the scales falling out of his eyes were only a partial healing?

I guess we can just ask Paul when we get to heaven, but the upshot is that he struggled with an ailment just as we too struggle with various ailments needling us. Yet unlike Paul, perhaps we cannot take the affliction in stride in the same way. Perhaps 3. We curse the needles that pierce us.

I visit a lot of people who have been pierced and are suffering. I get to listen to their concerns and share the hope that we have in Christ Jesus. I can hear their doubts and bring them the assurance that we receive in the Bible alone. I read them a Bible passage, I pray with them, and sometimes I bring them the Lord's Supper. Oftentimes, their families are with them, and whether they're Christians or not, they too get to hear those words of peace and hope; perhaps the Holy Spirit will use that seed of the Gospel to make faith grow into full bloom.

I am happy to visit people in all sorts of situations, good and bad, but I am especially called in when a needle is piercing them. Are you getting the picture? I

love doing hospital visits. I'm sure this isn't a hospital policy, but it seems that as soon as you're admitted to the hospital, they stick a needle in you. Yes, I'm talking about how medical professionals use I.V.'s to deliver medicine.

Now, having an I.V. in you doesn't do any good in and of itself. If you're sick, there's plenty of things someone evil could put in that I.V. line that could get you way sicker or kill you. Your ailments, your thorns in your side, are not in and of themselves good for you. In fact, if you are caught in a pattern of sin, left unchecked, you can know that that sin is slowly but surely killing you.

We wonder about the thorns and thistles we face in this life, but Paul gives us an answer as to why the Lord didn't remove the thorn in Paul's life. We read in verse 9, **“But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”** Like an I.V. needle, the ailments we face in this life can act as a means by which the medicine of God's Word and the Sacraments enter in so that we can be truly fed, encouraged, and sustained through suffering.

At the last pastor's conference, a pastor in the district shared with us a story of one of his hospital visits. One of his parishioners was a healthy, physically active man who was somewhat inactive in the life of the church. He was hospitalized with debilitating pain. The pastor is a bit more courageous than I am. He said to the man, “When you get better, I want you to remember having had this pain,” then he pointed to the cross on the wall of the hospital, “But even more importantly, I want you to remember the one who delivers you through it.” The man got better and hardly missed a Sunday service since.

Isn't it so that when we're laid low, we are most receptive to hearing the Gospel? Jesus' power is made perfect in weakness. That one thing that's a thorn in your side, it could be that that is what's keeping you tethered to the true source of life, Jesus Christ, who gives us His Easter victory through the Word preached, the Lord's Supper administered, words of forgiveness spoken by the minister or a Christian friend, and our baptisms lived out through living a life of repentance. 2. The needle is what's delivering the medicine.

Now, by the grace of God, I can't remember being hospitalized and needing I.V. medicine, but I do give blood regularly. It is a privilege to help someone else out through that simple act of giving away something my body easily produces, but I hate it when they stick the needle in. It hurts!

If someone asks me why I donate blood, it's because my life was saved by a blood donor. Namely, the blood of Jesus has saved me. Much more than the poke of a needle, think of the pain that Jesus endured for you. You are forgiven, washed clean, and granted eternal life through the precious medicine Jesus delivers you from the cross to His body and blood delivered to you in the Lord's Supper.

Thus, Paul writes, **“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.”** In the midst of sufferings and ailments, we lean all the more heavily into the grace of Christ which He is pleased to pour out on sinners like you and me, and we boast all the more in the one who knows best how to cure our ailment. 1. We boast in the Lord who delivers the medicine.

Today, we install Vicar Junkin to serve here at Faith as well as to help with mission planting efforts in Viroqua. A precious few here in this congregation were around for or remember vicars David Bergman and Mark Homp who served between 1978–1980. They also served in connection with church planting efforts in what is now the biggest congregation in our circuit, Shepherd of the Hills.

Vicar Junkin, there may be times this year that you feel a needle in your side, but that’s how the medicine gets in. There may be times that you feel weak, but in those times, rely on Christ as your strength. You may feel as though there is a thorn in your side, a messenger of Satan, but know that Christ’s power is made perfect in weakness. I am privileged to be your supervisor to serve as a weak one made strong in Christ just as our entire congregation is blessed to have you and your family in our midst this year. Together, all of us, **WE REJOICE IN THE POWER OF CHRIST IN THE MIDST OF SUFFERING AND WEAKNESS.**
Amen.