

**March 22, 2015**

**TEXT: 2 Corinthians 12:1–10**

**TITLE: Saving Salvation: It's All About Grace**

It was a warm spring evening when I sat with three guests on our patio—the apostle Paul and author Kathleen Norris sat together in the porch swing, and Fr. Bruce sat in a wicker chair with his feet up on a small ottoman. A lull had fallen over the conversation as we watched a neighbor's car drive by. Then I said to the trio, "Tell me a story about grace." Kathleen said, "I have one that happened in an airport." Fr. Bruce said, "I have one about a farmer who raised sheep." The apostle Paul sniffed once and slowly said, "My story takes place in the third heaven of Paradise." Knowing they had been trumped by St. Paul, both Bruce and Kathleen leaned back in their chairs and let the Master continue.

Paul said, I always had trouble in Corinth. It was a big city in its day, with lots of people and lots of new ideas floating around. In order to be heard, you had to be a big talker, if you know what I mean. I liked the people there a lot, and the early house churches had some true saints in them. But after I left and went on to start other churches, new missionaries arrived there. The first ones were fine. But the later ones, these super-apostles (v. 11), began bragging about their deep faith and their charismatic gifts and mystical visions. They questioned whether the gospel seeds I'd so carefully sown could ever bear good fruit, planting their own seeds of doubt among the Corinthians. So I had to write them a letter and boast a little, although I didn't boast in the way they boasted. Not at all.

I told them that I knew someone—(turning to Kathleen, Paul said, "What do you call it when you wiggle your fingers in the air?" "Air quotes," she replied.) Oh, yes, I told them that I (doing air quotes) "knew someone" who fourteen years ago had been caught up into the highest heaven. Was it physically real or just a vision—who can say? Anyway this person heard things and learned things that can never be shared. It was a vision of God's glory that far surpassed anything you poor souls on earth, including those super-apostles, might choose to talk about. I went on to tell the Corinthians, don't ask me more about these things because I don't want to boast about my own accomplishments. I don't want anyone to think higher of me just because of this special revelation. In fact, to make sure I wasn't tempted to boast about this, I was given a thorn in my flesh to keep me humble.

I broke in and asked, "Sir, you've never said what exactly this thorn in the flesh is. Will you tell us now?" Paul, who hated to be interrupted, gave me a stern glance and said, "Oh, it doesn't matter what it is. The Corinthians knew what I was referring to. Besides, it is just as bad to boast about the good things that make us special as it is to exaggerate the bad things that weigh us down. When the topic is God's grace, the focus should never be on us. Anyway, three times I prayed to have this thorn removed. But at last I heard a fresh word from the Lord: *My grace is sufficient for you; my power is made perfect in weakness.* I've held

onto that truth as gospel good news—it's a word about grace that still heals today.

Fr. Bruce took a sip of iced tea, swung his feet down from the ottoman, and said, "My story isn't as profound as St. Paul's, but it's also stuck with me over the years." I'd met Bruce Clanton back in Racine, Wisconsin. He had glasses, a beard and longish hair. He was what you'd call a cool priest. He spoke Spanish; he related well with the young people; he possibly rode a motorcycle, who knows? He had a gravelly voice (maybe he was an ex-smoker) but he had a strong laugh and a sincere heart and was well-liked in the community. Bruce said, "There was once a farmer who raised sheep. The lambs would graze in big, rolling pastures. But the problem was a neighbor had some large dogs that were allowed to roam free. Occasionally they would chase the sheep, harassing them, and sometimes killing the young lambs. The farmer pondered what he should do about this. He could call the county sheriff and press charges against the man—take him to court, sue him for damages. He could put up a high fence all around his pastures, although he knew that fences cost a lot of money and were never 100% effective. He could stoop so low as to poison the man's dogs or shoot them when they trespassed on his land. But none of those answers felt right. He needed to see things from a different perspective—one of grace."

Bruce took another sip of tea and went on. "The farmer decided that he'd give a lamb to each of the neighbor's young daughters. The girls learned how to care for them, and in time, the neighbor had a small herd of sheep grazing in his own pasture. Which meant he also had to learn how to tie up his dogs and re-train them around the lambs. Some folks might have thought the farmer was being weak, but in that act of generosity, he discovered a grace made perfect in weakness."

Kathleen shifted a bit on the porch swing and wished out loud that she hadn't waited to go last, because her airport story didn't feel nearly as profound as the two stories already shared. Kathleen Norris, back in 1974, left her beloved New York City to move to Lemmon, South Dakota—to live in a small home built 50 years before that by her grandparents. That experience set in motion a spiritual reawakening for her, involving numerous books and lots of time spent in Benedictine monasteries and small Presbyterian churches. Pushing her brown-gray hair out of eyes, Kathleen began by saying that she had been thinking about people in the bible who easily might have been considered out of favor with God—people like the apostle Paul sitting next to her, who had a grim track record of persecuting the Christians prior to becoming one himself. Paul gave her a sheepish grin and Kathleen went on to say that God's grace is always around us, coming to us in ways we seldom expect and it's truly made perfect in our weakness and vulnerability.

Kathleen said that she was sitting in a non-descript departure lounge at some big city airport—one of those places with a couple television sets mounted high, but

always on even though no one is really watching; and furnished with bolted down chairs intentionally designed to be just uncomfortable enough to keep you from falling asleep in them. People in these departure gate areas typically don't interact much. You sit; you watch the monitor; you wait. But on this day, a young couple with a toddler came into the gate area. The baby was steadying himself on the side of the stroller. As he passed by the seats, he would stare intently at the people seated there—and as soon as another face looked back at him, he would respond with absolute delight. Young, old, pretty, ugly—the infant didn't care. Each new face evoked a fresh outburst of laughter. It was beautiful to see.

Suddenly to Kathleen the drab departure gate had become the gateway to heaven. She said, as I watched that baby play with any adult who allowed it, I realized that this is how God looks at us—staring into our faces in order to be delighted, to see the creature God made and called good. God loves to look at us, and loves it when we look back. Even when we don't feel worthy of God's loving gaze, or feel too wounded to look up from our pain and sorrow, Christ finds a way to get us to see him. I think that's what is at the heart of our times of prayer and worship. We praise God not to boast about and celebrate our own faith, not to be super-apostles, but to give thanks for the faith God has in us. To look at God and let God look back at us—and to smile and be delighted that God has called us God's own.<sup>1</sup> It's not weak to take our gaze off ourselves; rather I think that's the definition of how strong grace is for us today.

Fr. Bruce smiled and said, “Yes, grace abounds. It is not limited to where we expect to find it. It is omnipresent because God is omnipresent. It is omnipotent because God is omnipotent. It is that gaze of God who is anxious for us to look back and know that we are loved, forgiven, and saved. And it is truly sufficient for us. We are never more weak than when we pretend we have no weaknesses. We are never more strong than when we look up, look around and know that God in Christ is near. Thankfully always near.”

The apostle Paul, unused to being silent for so long, cleared his throat and closed out our conversation by reciting these words from memory: *Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” 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.*”

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<sup>1</sup> From Kathleen Norris' book, Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith, 1998, pp.150-1.