

**SKÓLOPS ( σκόλοψ): Dealing with Finite Disappointment** Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:2-10 P9/B

By the Rev. Karen Faye Siegfried; St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Atascadero, CA 7/7/2024

The operating word today is SKOLOPS! It is a Greek word translated as “thorn” in today’s reading from the Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians. In this letter, Paul claims that he has a thorn or a skolops in his flesh, which we often refer to today as a “thorn in our side.” Literally, a skolops is a pointed stake, a sharp object, something that can cause irritation, pain, or even death. It can be as simple as a splinter in one’s hand or as deadly as an instrument for torture. Most of us have experienced at least one thorn in our flesh that challenges us throughout life. This thorn can cause annoyance, hardship, grief, and even pain. How do we deal with a thorn in our side; one that causes havoc and diminishes our hope for a particular future? How do we as Christians deal with the finite disappointments that come our way? This is the subject of my sermon.

In today’s reading, Paul is writing to a congregation he founded years earlier in Corinth Greece. It was his second letter to this particular church, written around the year 55 CE. This letter refers to an upheaval among the congregation whose members seem to prefer the teachings and authority of other apostles rather than Paul’s. In response, Paul writes this letter to defend his qualifications. Yet while he boasts of his strengths and accomplishments, he finally admits to his weakness, specifically to the thorn in his flesh.

We do not know exactly what this thorn is, but it is quite clear that it had a humbling effect on his ambitions. Some commentators believe this “thorn in his flesh” was a physical ailment such as stuttering, epilepsy, eye problems, depression, or headaches. Others believe this skolops refers to the constant harassment, the grim realities of persecution, or the many challenges by his opponents. Of course, all of this is pure speculation. What we do know about this skolops is that it remained with Paul throughout his life in spite of prayer and faithful witness. Eventually, he accepted this finite disappointment as part of his journey but never gave up hope in reaching his end goal which was to spread the good news in Christ.

In 1968, nearly two months before his assassination on April 4<sup>th</sup>, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke these powerful words: “We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.” These words served as a rallying cry for hope in the face of obstacles facing people of color. These words addressed a proper response to disappointments faced by individuals and communities when confronting unrealized dreams. Inspired by the apostle Paul’s persecutions and imprisonments, Martin Luther King Jr. shunned violence yet called for radical hope, proclaiming that “the challenges that weigh us down today, should never dissuade us from imagining a better, more just, and more love-filled future.” Radical hope is the conviction that the future holds new possibilities that are not evident in the present!

Like King and St. Paul before him, many of the world’s well known and influential personalities have been resilient and changed their thorns into crowns. For instance, Hellen Keller, inflicted with blindness and deafness, did not respond to her skolops with bitterness or fatalism. Instead, by the exercise of a strong will, she transformed her negative circumstances into positive assets, blazing a trail for the deaf and the blind. Then there was Christopher Reeve, the superman actor, who at the age of 42 years old fell off a horse, resulting in a spinal cord injury that left him paralyzed. He spent the rest of his life living on a ventilator and being transported by a wheelchair. Instead of wallowing in his unfortunate physical state, he spent the rest of his life dedicated to research and advocacy for spinal cord injuries. Without hope, the human heart would break.

But what about us, everyday folks who are afflicted with some thorn or another? Maybe it’s depression, or nerve pain, or incontinence, insomnia, or obesity. Maybe you have a challenging child or family member who is mentally ill. Maybe you were deeply hurt as a child in a way that continues to traumatize you. Perhaps you became widowed at a young age or have struggled for years with a chronic illness. Maybe you have been discriminated against because of your race, gender, or sexual orientation. Maybe you had a learning disability and were unable to realize your vocational dreams. Perhaps you had a failed marriage that left you feeling insecure and lonely. If you are struggling with a thorn in the flesh, or a thorn bush in full bloom, pray by all means and use whatever resources you have to overcome your affliction. Move into determined action! But if your thorn remains in spite of all your efforts, then shift your focus from disappointment to asking what God can accomplish through what is.

I have a skolops that is minor but is limiting: I simply get tired easily and require about 9 hours of sleep each night. You might ask, well what is the big deal? The big deal is that this fatigue has hindered a long-term dream that I had since the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. On Easter Day of 1967, I received a revelation prompting me to become a physician and work with the poor. This calling filled me with the fruit of the spirit and changed my life. I became focused, studied harder in high school, worked on the weekends as a nurse's aid, and saved as much money as I could for college.

I first attended nursing school thinking this was a good strategy since I had attended a mediocre high school and needed a competitive edge. However, halfway through my nursing program, I read that most medical schools deemed nursing degrees as insufficient for admission. So, I finished my degree, worked as a nurse on the weekends and summers, and returned to school for another 4 years to complete a degree in chemistry. But as I was about to graduate from the chemistry program, I came face to face with my skolops, the thorn in my flesh. Whenever I tried to work a series of night shifts at the hospital, I became exhausted. Whenever I tried to work more than one double shift, I became sick. As I watched the surgical residents work night and day, forced to cover 72 hour shifts over the long weekends while struggling to stay awake, I came to the realization that I just couldn't do it. I knew my limitations. I knew I didn't have the stamina to stay up studying all night in medical school nor did I have the stamina to make it through a residency program. For many years, I grieved the loss of my vocation as a physician, and I still believe that I would have made a good doctor except for the physical demands. Sometimes, our dreams are unfulfilled, and we must embrace the life we have. This is not a grim, bitter acceptance of a fatalist but rather a grief we must bear. And so by God's grace, here I am with you today. And that is sufficient!

Life will sometimes present us with challenges and setbacks, which are often beyond our control. These disappointments are part and parcel of the human condition. They may be temporary or limited in scope, but they can nonetheless be discouraging and disheartening. The answer to finite disappointment lies in our willingness to accept unwanted and unfortunate circumstances while maintaining an unyielding sense of hope. Hope is not blind optimism, but rather a steadfast belief in our ability to face adversity head on, learn from our experiences, and ultimately grow stronger as individuals. Hope can act as a beacon of light, guiding us through even the darkest of times.

If you are struggling with a thorn in the flesh or a thorn bush in full bloom, the most fruitful course is to stand firm with courageous determination, move forward nonviolently amid obstacles and setbacks, accept disappointments, and cling to hope. Place your failure at the forefront of your mind and stare daringly at it. Ask yourself, "How may I transform this liability into an asset?"

The Lord said to Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." Paul replied: "So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell with me...for whenever I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Corinthians 12)

*Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people.*