

“Wildflowers in the Garden of Jesus”

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²I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. ³And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows— ⁴was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. ⁵On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. ⁶But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, ⁷even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. ⁸Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, ⁹but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for 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. ¹⁰Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:2-10)

"I know a person in Christ," Paul begins. He makes it sound like he is talking about someone else, but some believe Paul is describing his own religious awakening here. He is speaking about himself, but it is a former version of himself -- one so removed from his present reality and identity as to be almost a different person altogether. Paul had been changed by a wondrous out-of-body experience, a powerful vision in which he was "caught up to the third heaven" and overheard glorious sounds that are reserved for Paradise, words that are too pure and lofty for mortal lips to speak. His mystical vision was such a gift and transformation that it acted like a spiritual helium balloon – one large enough to pull him up and out of his earthly consciousness.

Interestingly, Paul uses this glorious experience primarily as a foil to talk about something that everyone can understand: his so-called “thorn in the flesh.” While his vision of heaven pulled him up toward a higher understanding and a new plane of existence, there was a counterbalance that tethered Paul’s feet firmly to human ground. Paul never disclosed exactly what the thorn was – the precise ailment or disability that held him back. But whatever it was seems to have been painful enough and limiting enough for Paul to repeatedly ask God to heal him or deliver him from its ponderous weight. Paul probably considered his mystical trip to heaven to be his greatest strength, but it was balanced out by his greatest weakness, and this tension helped Paul to learn the greatest lesson he ever learned or taught: that, in the kingdom of God, power is made perfect not in strength, but in weakness... but no matter what we might suffer or endure, God’s grace will always be sufficient to overcome it.

I actually think Paul wanted to leave it a little ambiguous, a little unclear, as to whether he was talking about himself or another person in this lesson. Either way, the lesson speaks to every person and every life. When Paul says, “I know a person in Christ,” he is speaking about himself, but he is also speaking about you, and me, and every other person who seeks God. And it is in that spirit that I want to tell you this morning another story of strength and



weakness, another story of a thorn in the flesh, another story of a person who felt pulled between the glory of heaven and the often-painful limitations of earth. You see, I too know a person in Christ. Rather, I did know him before he died tragically in 2015. He was a high school classmate of mine in Greensboro, North Carolina, and his name was Keith.

Everyone remembers Keith as the light-hearted, funny guy who made everyone laugh. He had an uncanny ability to bring joy to people and make them feel better about themselves. Not surprisingly, his house was the presumptive location for parties, and it was at those parties that he was most in his element. He played football and he played the tuba, if you can picture that combination. He was a big guy in the same way that John Belushi and Chris Farley were big guys -- big belly, big shoulders, big smile, big personality, big heart.

But Keith also had a big problem. Like Belushi and Farley, he lived to excess in a lot of ways, and he tended to make bad decisions at times. The thorn in Keith's flesh was addiction – a lifelong struggle with alcohol, drugs, and a lifestyle that sometimes grasped for stability but never quite found it.

When it became clear that Keith's body would never recover from the extensive damage he had done to it, he came home to Greensboro, back to the house he grew up in. He quickly reconnected with Fil Anderson, a local campus minister who had known Keith when we were in high school back in the 80's. They began to meet together regularly, and it gave Keith a chance to lament about the way he had lived his life, how he had burdened his family and friends, how his bad decisions had hurt him and those he loved. At one point, Fil asked Keith what he believed God thought of him. Keith responded without hesitation, "That I am a huge disappointment." He died just a few weeks later, at the age of 46.

In the eulogy he delivered at Keith's funeral, Fil shared these spiritual struggles with the congregation, and he used them to make a fascinating comparison to a 19th century nun. He never identified the nun by name, but I knew exactly who he was talking about.

Her name was Thérèse. She was born in a small town in France, the daughter of a local jeweler and watchmaker. She was an ordinary child, born to ordinary parents. She was also weak and sickly, and those who knew her would say there was nothing particularly notable about her intelligence. She was shy, moody and often standoffish. She was, in many respects, a very unremarkable girl.

But in a few important respects, she was extraordinary. She was a deeply spiritual person, becoming a nun at the age of fifteen. That was well below the normal age for entry into a convent, but she was so passionate that she made a direct appeal to the pope, falling at his feet to beg to for special dispensation. She spent her religious life in a Carmelite convent in nearby Lisieux, and even though she died early at the tender age of 24, her writings are still studied and quoted by millions of faithful believers. Her canonization to sainthood was put on the fast track, and Pope Pius X would eventually call her "the greatest saint of modern times."¹ Statues of her image stand in thousands of churches around the world,² and people continue to be amazed at her piety and inspired by her faith.

The most obvious connection between Saint Thérèse of Lisieux and my friend Keith is the fact that both of them died far too young. But the similarities go much deeper than that. Both of them, as they struggled with their respective thorns in the flesh, were keenly aware

¹"Thérèse of Lisieux," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Th%C3%A9r%C3%A8se_of_Lisieux#Canonization

² Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: The Story of a Soul*, trans. by John Beevers. New York: Image Books (2001), p. viii.

that their deaths would come soon. And both wanted desperately to live their final days to the very best of their ability. Both of them wanted to leave something behind that was infused with grace, light, hope and love.

One of the things that most confused Thérèse about the world was the fact that God seemed to have preferences. She didn't understand why some people seemed to be more blessed than others. In her words, some people just got more grace than others. I think Keith wondered about this, too... wondered why he wasn't able to get it all together, why his path seemed so hard, while others seemed to have it so much easier.

In her memoirs, Thérèse shared that, after a while Jesus eventually saw fit to "enlighten her about this mystery," and he showed her the light through flowers. "I saw that all the flowers He has created are lovely," she wrote. "The splendor of the rose and the whiteness of the lily do not rob the little violet of its scent nor the daisy of its simple charm. I saw that if every tiny flower wanted to be a rose, spring would lose its loveliness and there would be no wild flowers to make the meadows gay."³

"It's just the same," she continued, "in the world of souls -- which is the garden of Jesus. He has created the great saints who are like the lilies and the roses, but He has also created much lesser saints and they must be content to be the daisies or the violets which rejoice His eyes whenever He glances down."⁴

In the kingdom of God, some people are the roses and the lilies -- the grand and beautiful flowers that catch everyone's attention. But "the garden of Jesus," to use Thérèse's words, is also graced by the lesser flowers -- the ones that are a little more basic, perhaps a little less colorful, but no less beautiful in the eyes of God. These, Thérèse wrote, are God's "wildflowers," and as homely as they may be, they still delight the Lord. "The sun shines equally both on the cedars and on every tiny flower," she wrote. "In just the same way, God looks after every soul as if it had no equal. All is planned for the good of every soul, exactly as the seasons are so arranged that the humblest daisy blossoms at the appointed time."⁵

I doubt that any of us would describe ourselves as a prize-winning rose in the garden of Jesus. Most of us are amazed that we could even be part of that garden. At best, we are wildflowers... unremarkable sprouts on the side of the road... the fruit of seeds that fell in imperfect soil but somehow managed to put down some roots and bloom anyway. When we are able to flower, our blossoms tend to be fleeting and transitory, not lasting long in the heat of the day. No, most of us, including Paul, are keenly aware of our flaws and blemishes and weaknesses. Some of us may even share the deep existential worry of my friend Keith, fearing that, in the eyes of God, we are just a big disappointment.

The thing is, as beautiful, faithful, wise, and pious as she was, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux always considered herself to be one of those humble wildflowers in the garden of Jesus. She never saw herself as a rose, or a lily. But she was still confident that God's sun shone as much on her as it did on anyone else. She was convinced that God was pleased with her, even if her contributions were meager and limited. Even today, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux is known to Christians around the world by the nickname "The Little Flower of Jesus."⁶

³ Autobiography at 2.

⁴ *Id.* at 2-3.

⁵ *Id.* at 3.

⁶ "Thérèse of Lisieux," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Th%C3%A9r%C3%A8se_of_Lisieux#Canonization

So maybe it's not so bad to be Queen Anne's Lace, which graces roadsides with sprays of simple white blooms... or low-lying pipsissewa, with its deep green leaves, which hug the forest ground and nest one white blossom in their center... or beargrass yucca, with its tough, prickly blades and balloon-like white blossoms, which hang like church bells on a tower in May.⁷ Even if we aren't the prettiest blooms in the field, we all have a place in the garden of Jesus.

My friend Keith was often disappointed in himself. He regretted many of the decisions he made, and lamented that he could have done so much more, been so much more. I don't know if he and Fil ever talked about Saint Thérèse, the "Little Flower" in the garden of Jesus, and even if they did, I think Keith would have had a tough time even accepting that he had a place among the little flowers along a highway. But as his life came to an end, I believe Keith did come to realize that what we think of ourselves, and how we think we stack up against everybody else, doesn't really matter, at least not in the eyes of God. I believe Keith did come to accept the great truth that there is no human weakness that God cannot overcome, no failure that God cannot touch and transform into beauty, no plant so weak or dry that God cannot bring it to blossom. "My grace is sufficient for you," God says, "for my power is made perfect even in your weakness."

I've always considered it a blessing that Paul never tells us exactly what his thorn in the flesh was. There are all kinds of theories -- that it was guilt about his past, malaria, depression, epilepsy or problems with his eyesight -- but no one knows. And what that means is that all of us can relate in some way to Paul's pain, because all of us have weaknesses that limit us and cause us difficulty. And that means the door is open for all of us to say, with Paul, "I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

So take heart, all of you beautiful, flawed, treasured creations of God. As the Little Flower of Jesus once wrote, "if every tiny flower wanted to be a rose, spring would lose its loveliness and there would be no wild flowers to make the meadows gay... God looks after every soul as if it had no equal... [and] the seasons are so arranged that even the humblest daisy blossoms at exactly the right time."

Yes, I know a person in Christ who was and is one of those wildflowers in the garden of Jesus. And I expect you do, too.

Amen.

⁷ http://www.ncwildflower.org/plant_galleries/browse_all_pics/