

Spring Training for the Christian Team

Lent 3: Handling the Thorns

(Ezekiel 2: 1-8; II Corinthians 12: 7-10; Psalm 20; Mark 4: 1-20)

Last week, moving right along in the season of Lent—which we have converted into “Spring Training” on the model of professional baseball—we played our first “exhibition game”. We met the dreaded Giants, and I think we stood up pretty well against them, though whether we won or lost is ultimately for *you* to determine. And in either case, as it was an *exhibition* game, the *score* is not the main thing, but rather, it’s whether we *learned* any new *skills* and *strategies* for Christian faith in the *real* game, which is *daily Christian living*.

Today we have our second game, and this may be a tougher, harder and bloodier game than we had last week. Our opponents today could not be *more* different than the Giants we met last week. Today it’s the *Thorns*, and these little guys are awesome. They’re not big and loud like the Giants, but rather they’re so small, quick and quiet that often you don’t see them until it’s too late. Just like the Giants, the Thorn team has been around since Bible times; they were *named* in fact by a biblical *committee* that included the prophet Ezekiel, Jesus and Paul the Apostle. But quite *unlike* the Giants, the Thorns don’t come onto the field with a lot of noise, they don’t even bother trying to intimidate or frighten us, but instead they keep a very low profile. They’re masters of deception.

The Thorns learned their style of play from guerrilla warfare, which means that they will avoid at all costs a full-frontal assault, and instead will employ “strike-and-run” tactics. They’ll do their utmost to blend in or to hide behind something attractive, like a thorn on a rosebush. And rather than trying to out-slug us with powerful bats or out-run us with speed on the bases, the Thorns’ primary strategy is to *capitalize on our mistakes*. They’re going to “sting and run”, they’re going to try to knock us off our game by a thousand little jabs, and although each jab is little more than a pinprick, each little wound easily becomes *infected*, and over the course of the game those little infected wounds will wear us down. Their strategy is not so much to *beat* us as to let *us* beat *ourselves*. Not to out-play us, but rather to upset us and infect us, not enough to kill us outright, but just enough to render our *advantage*—which is *faith*—ineffective.

Do you see how completely the tables have turned in comparison with our game last week? Where the Giants were big, loud and slow, and where we could use David’s example and beat them by being *small, quick and smart*, today it’s the opposite. The Thorns are the ones who are smaller, quicker and easily smart enough to let us beat ourselves with our own

mistakes, our own foolish impatience, our quick temper, stupid retaliation, wounded egos, stale grudges, and all those other human foibles and weaknesses that we know only too well.

Let's see if we can put some faces on our opponents this morning and get a better idea of who it is, or *what* it is that we're up against, and let's start with some comments Jesus made, because of all the Bible characters, Jesus was the one who clearly understood thorns best. In his parable about the Sower and the Seed, Jesus had some great insight into thorns, and it's a shame that we don't often notice this part of the parable. It seems we're usually in too much of a rush to get to the end of the story and to squeeze the "lesson" out of it, and we miss some of the key details along the way. What Jesus was illustrating in the parable was the different ways in which people respond to the truth. His story suggests that the *majority* of people, represented by the first *two groups* in the story, when confronted by the truth won't really give the truth a chance. Either they won't listen at all, or else what little they do hear will just as quickly leak out the other ear. Now, what happens to these characters in the parable, as in *life*, is quite understandable. They had their chance and blew it. Because they put no roots down *into* the truth, they will soon be blown away or eaten up by life. Now, the key instructive contrast in the parable is between the *third and fourth* groups, both of which *do* listen to the truth and put down roots. Both groups *begin* to grow in the truth. The only difference between them is that one group gets choked off and *defeated* by *thorns*. And there's the lesson of the parable, in its tragic dimension. The lesson is that healthy Christian faith has everything to do with how you *deal* with *thorns*.

In the explanation of the parable that Jesus gave later to his disciples, he took the time and trouble to identify a few of these deadly thorns. The very first thorn he named was "Worry", and people, that's no coincidence. I think Jesus started right at the top of the list, because worry, particularly when it has become a habit in your life, is the thorn that comes closest to home, will sting most often and will do its utmost to undermine your faith. Each seemingly harmless little worry that drops into your mind comes with a painful little sting that will cleverly draw your attention *away* from faith and trust. And it's that absence of faith and trust, even more than whatever thing you happen to be worried about, that will get your heartbeat racing and your blood-pressure climbing and will put your thoughts at the mercy of your fears. Worry is certainly one of the nastiest of thorns. But Jesus named a few others to go along with it. "Deceitfulness and Desires" pertaining to wealth, material things and luxurious comfort in life, were close behind Worry on his list of the world's most dangerous thorns.

I want to pursue the direction that Jesus was pointing in his list, and I want to add a few more, just to provide some local colour and flavour, and to bring the list a little closer to our Church setting. “Grumbling and Complaining” are the thorn duet most often sung within Church walls. “Tactless Criticism”, among Church people, will always be one of the very sharpest thorns we encounter. When I was a kid we had in our backyard some wild thorn-apple trees that were loaded with magnificent two-inch spikes. “Tactless Criticism” is the one that, in my mind, comes closest to the dimension and damage of those thorns, because it always has a personal edge and a very unnecessary character. “Compulsive Comparisons” also make great thorns, especially in our Western society where we put so much stock in outward appearances and fashion, and where it seems so natural to build ourselves up by cutting others down. “Destructive Habits”, especially those that are already destructive to our physical health, are very much like thorns in the way that they don’t destroy us all at once, but rather by a thousand little cuts and jabs. “Pessimistic and Defeatist Attitudes” are a couple more constant thorns that always love to show up at Church meetings.

There are a few names and faces for the Thorn team we’re up against today. Now, to help us form a strategy for dealing with them, let’s look at a couple more biblical examples. Again, we have to start with Jesus because this guy really knew thorns, and everything he learned about them he learned from personal experience. I would venture to say there was not a single day in his ministry when Jesus did not feel at least a few thorns. Let me give a couple of examples. Remember the story, right after Jesus had announced that he was going to be killed in Jerusalem, and the disciples got to arguing about which of *them* would be “Number One” when Jesus was gone? *That was a thorn* for Jesus. Remember the story about Lazarus? His dear sisters jabbed Jesus with a nasty thorn, twice in fact, when they scolded him, “If you had been here, my brother would not have died!” The Pharisees, of course, presented Jesus with a whole bouquet of thorns every time they showed up while he was teaching. The thorn that probably drew the most blood came from one of his own disciples—who betrayed him. Then Peter, at a critical moment, denied ever knowing him, and gave him another thorn. Thomas doubted him and gave him another. And you recall, of course, what they *crowned* Jesus with. As if *he* needed any *more* thorns, they fashioned a crown out of thorns and stuck it right on his head. But the sad thing about that was that it was the perfect symbol for *his* kind of Kingship. Not a crown of gold, that symbolizes wealth or power or politics or ambition, but *thorns* that represent, in a very real way, pain, suffering and bleeding. The thorns Jesus wore to his death symbolized all the thorns he had ever felt, but *also* all the thorns *he* had personally

conquered. All the thorns he had grabbed with his bare hands and pulled up by the roots, so that people could follow his lead and walk without fear.

There's our first lesson toward forming a strategy against thorns. You *do* need to reach down, take hold and pull them out by the roots. Painful? Yes, usually. Necessary? Absolutely. And there's no alternative. You cannot ignore thorns. It's in their pointy nature not to *let* you ignore them. More importantly, there's no excuse for letting thorns steal our blood and our faith, or for letting them over-run our homes and families and churches. Still more importantly, there's no excuse for *planting* thorns and jabbing *each other* with them the way we Christians sometimes do.

There's one other Bible character who wants to speak about thorns and strategies. The Apostle Paul had what you might call a "*pet thorn*"—one that followed him around and often clamoured for his attention. Just *what* that thorn was, isn't the important thing—disappointing as that will be for biblical scholars, myself included, who all have their pet theories about Paul's thorn. Whatever the thorn was, Paul reports quite honestly that he prayed about it, at least three times, and understandably asked God to *remove* it. But as often as he made that request, the request was denied. *But*—and here comes the lesson—don't think for a moment that Paul's prayer was not *answered*. The *request* may have been denied, but his prayer was certainly answered. And the answer he was given was so much bigger, stronger and smarter than his thorn that it gave Paul the victory in that contest, and better still, it gives us the winning strategy we desperately need today. Paul's answer, direct from the one who knows the most about thorns, was this: "My *grace* is *sufficient* for you! My power is made perfect, my strength is demonstrated to the full and given most freely, in and through your weakness!" That's what Paul needed to hear in order to cope with and conquer his own most persistent thorn.

And there's our second lesson about thorns. God is not going to pull your thorns *for* you. No more than God was going to throw the rock for David. He's not going to pull your thorns *for* you. Why? Because thorns are only pulled *by faith*. You need faith to see them in the first place. And you certainly need faith to reach down and *grab* them. Grace will strengthen the faith you need to do that, and better still, the grace we need will be in direct proportion to the task and the need and the pain that lie before us. But don't expect or demand that God will do the pulling. A second reason for that, of course, is the fact that the thorns really are, after all, our own responsibility. That's partly because of our original job description, given by God way back in the Garden, when he enlisted us to tend and keep the Garden—to till the soil and harvest the fruit, to trim the weeds and pull the thorns. But the thorns are also our responsibility

because, for the most part, the thorns that sting *us* are the ones *we* have *made for ourselves*. The vast majority of the thorns we walk into and brush up against are the very ones we have planted, and the majority of *those* thorns, we have planted with our *tongues*. (And there, by the way, is a sneak preview of our game next week, when we set out to tame the Tongues.)

The sharpest of the thorns we encounter are *definitely* the ones we have planted, and that's true whether in our homes and marriages, in our children or among our neighbours, or sadly, among our fellow Christians. Now, remember especially the thorns that grow on the rosebush. Often the thorns we Christians jab into each other may *appear* as pleasing as a rose in bloom. The thorns we stick into our kids, for example, probably have the best of *intentions* and may *sound* quite wise and wonderful *to us*, and we can hardly believe it when the child cries out in pain. Among Church people, it happens frequently that we can say the right things to each other, we can use the right words and even quote the appropriate Scripture, and yet those comments can still have a *hook* on them, and a *barb* on that hook that's going to draw a little blood and *quite* possibly get infected. It's not the words that do the damage, it's how we *use* them and the *tone* that carries them. It's not the message we convey to each other, but the *faith that's beneath it*, and whether or not there's any love in that faith.

We can't afford to let thorns grow wild and untended around us. Our homes and families and society simply cannot afford it. And our Churches? Well, thorns can be the *death* of them, just as Jesus explained in his parable. There's no alternative to doing battle with your thorns. You must face them squarely for a final showdown, and you need to show them once and for all who's in charge. To do that, you begin like Paul, by praying. But not that God will pull your thorns *for* you. Rather, we ask for the grace and courage to pull them ourselves, and the patience to keep our cool when the game gets hot. We ask for wisdom to identify our thorns, and to understand clearly where they come from and how they grow around us. And then, the moment of action: you reach out your hand, grasp firmly and pull that thorn out by the roots. Now, just in case there's any doubt or confusion, I'm going to tell you *exactly* what it means to pull a thorn out by the roots. If the thorn is one that *you* have planted, then you need to ask *forgiveness* from those who have felt its sting. If a thorn was planted by someone *else*, *you* must forgive *them*, and tell them so. And to take care of a thorn's deepest and most stubborn roots, you look to Christ for a more determined and more *compassionate* faith.

It's no fun at all, playing against the Thorns, even in an exhibition match. It's a painful game at the best of times, and a game we would love to avoid. But for people who hold the Christian faith, and for those who seek to meet the problems of daily living with the exercise of Christian faith, this is a game we *must* play—and must *win*.

Rev. Steven K. Smith,
Knox Presbyterian Church, Magnetawan
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