

TEXT: 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

SUBJECT: Facing “super apostles,” Paul acknowledges he is a suffering servant of Christ.

TOPIC: Vulnerability is often your “nothing” that points to God’s instruction for your life and living.

SUBJECT: What’s Your Nothing?

I don’t think I’ll ever forget what one of my earliest pastoral mentors told me.

At the time, I shared how I was going through my first really rough patch in life. I was experiencing a grief I’d never experienced as I saw dreams fall by the wayside. I had no idea what to do with the grief at the time. The grief made me feel like I was nothing.

So, I mentioned my feelings to my mentor, and his response surprised me. He said, *“Mark, maybe this is part of who God is calling you to be.”*

Our reading from 2 Corinthians this week mentions something equally surprising. It’s asking us “what’s your nothing?” You can call it whatever you want, but your nothing is the thorn in your side balanced by God’s sufficient grace. Paul’s thorn and God’s grace both point to my nothing and your nothing. Your nothing and my nothing are the thorns that haunts us – that we pray would go away – that God doesn’t remove, so God can do something with them through grace.

Nothing is where God’s grace meets the thorn every one of us has in our side. The thorn makes us particularly vulnerable. Sometimes we know what the thorn is; sometimes God’s waiting for us to figure out what it is. I started figuring mine out about several years ago. Lately I’ve been doing timeline research of my life for a continuing education gathering I’m going to in a few weeks. As I have worked on it on and off recently, I’ve been particularly compelled to how my life got loaded down when I was 7-years-old, and I cannot help but wonder how those life experiences that year didn’t shape the rest of my life. At the center of them, then, was trauma, grief, and the reality or threat of losses.

It almost feels like some of what's happened in my life since 2019 is an echo of those childhood years finally sharpening an awareness I need today. Then again, I think most people would agree with the saying that God works in mysterious ways. Well, this all seems to point to God's mysterious ways working in me. It's my nothing and God is calling me toward it.

Don't get me wrong. When I say it's a nothing God's inviting me to live into, that doesn't mean it has no value; my nothing and your nothing most certainly have value. I've felt every bit of what there is to feel in all of my nothing and you probably have, too. My experiences have been painful. They've caused me significant grief. They've made me ask questions about almost every aspect of my life. My nothing and your nothing aren't about how we feel about them. My nothing and your nothing are what God is inviting us to embrace, so God can work through them, and so God can heal our lives and the lives of others around us. My nothing and your nothing, thanks to God's grace, is nothing to God and everything to you and me and people around us. My nothing is my thorn. My nothing, like Paul's, is Satan's messenger that makes it so God can transform my afflictions and your afflictions into a triumph of grace.

My nothing exposes my vulnerabilities just like your nothing exposes your vulnerabilities. Paul's vulnerability was that he refused to go the way of the super-apostles who were challenging his authority in Corinth. Paul's vulnerability was that he had a thorn in his flesh (whatever it was) and for God's grace to be sufficient, Paul had to follow the way of Christ. He had to suffer. He had to surrender to God. He had to take the high road when the super apostles criticized Paul's technique, speaking abilities, and theology.

In essence, letting God's grace work through your witness is about taking a leap of faith. Letting God's grace flow through your vulnerabilities and your nothing means giving up control

to God. Letting God's grace flow through your vulnerabilities and your nothing means opening yourself up to the life God is waiting for you to live and share with others.

With God's grace working through our vulnerabilities and our nothings, we are doing what some of the greatest sages have done through their vulnerabilities, and their suffering, and their pain because ultimately what they discovered – and what you and I are being asked to discover – is how God works through our weaknesses, so we may be strong, just like Paul discovered.

The more we embrace our nothing and the more vulnerable we let ourselves be before God, the deeper our faith becomes and the more we grow spiritually. God is inviting us to do that, so we don't try and protect ourselves and control our lives and avoid pain and weakness.

So, with God's help, what's your nothing? Discover it. Embrace it. Get to know it. See where God is asking you to take it because doing so means growing into your awareness of God's presence.

The only way to truly experience the sustaining grace of God is to take the risk with your nothing, and when you do, you'll discover new levels of personal strength you never knew you had, and right now – at this time in history – I believe it's time to let vulnerability help us find the courage to face some really frightening and challenging ebbs and flows of life.

The choice to embrace God through our nothings is just like the choice the people at Nazareth faced when Jesus was run out of town. The people ran Jesus out of town because they felt safer with their doubts than taking risks of faith, and Jesus is inviting us to let our nothing make us take risks of faith.

I pray we don't make the same mistake, and we won't when we work with God to discover what our nothings are.

In the name of the triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – one God in perfect community. Amen.