

**Sunday Sermon**  
**July 8, 2018**  
**II Corinthians 12:2-10**  
**How Can I Keep from Singing?**

Introduction

I hope you had a Bible opened to II Corinthians so you could follow along as our lesson was read from Paul's letter to the church at Corinth. Now I ask you to take a hymnal and open it to number 821, and let us look at some of the words there.

"How Can I Keep from Singing?" I first met this great, old song when our younger son decided to attend a Quaker college and I learned about the Society of Friends. At one point, he took me to a Friends meeting. It was an un-programmed meeting, and there sitting in 45 minutes of silence, I admit that the main question on my mind was "How Can I Keep from Squirming?"

But it was through his journey with the Quakers that I learned how this song has been passed from one era to the next, with people adding verses in the passing.

It is not exactly clear who wrote the main verses of the song. You can see that the note at the bottom of the page credits someone named Pauline T. We know the Rev. Robert Lowry published the verses in 1869, put to a tune that he had written. This was not our Robert Lowry; Bob is not quite that old. This was Robert Wadsworth Lowry, an American Baptist pastor.

Lowry published those first verses in a hymn just after a civil war had divided our nation. We fought each other, sacrificing 620,000 mostly young Americans by our own hands. Look at the affirmations here: "My life flows on in endless song; above earth's lamentation. . .Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear that music ringing. . .What though my joys and comforts die? I know my Savior liveth. What though the darkness gather round? Songs in the night he giveth. "

Almost a century later, Doris Plenn wrote a verse in the 1950s, during the era of McCarthyism. It was then that the hymn became meaningful to Quakers and others who refused to sign loyalty oaths and, as a result, lost their jobs, their livelihood. Then the story goes that Plenn taught the song to Pete Seeger, and he used it up during the turbulent 1960s. Then Enya, a singer in troubled Ireland, won a Grammy for the recording she made in the early 1990s.

This song has journeyed and brought hope to people in many kinds of pain and suffering. Perhaps it is time to write another verse.

I

No one was more aware of the pains and sufferings of this life than the Apostle Paul. He had his share; and when he wrote to the early Christians, he always presented his afflictions right along with the rest of his credentials.

We do not know what was Paul's thorn that gave him so much pain, but we

know it got in Paul's way, so much so that he begged God not once but three times to take it away.

The answer to that prayer turned out to be a major revelation for Paul. "My grace is sufficient for you," God told him, "for power is made perfect in weakness."

The first step of Alcoholics Anonymous is a radical departure from our natural human approach to dealing with a problem. Our natural tendency is to try to buck up and gather strength, but A.A. says admit defeat. Our human nature says get a hold on things, but A.A. says let go of trying to control.

The first step in all Twelve Step programs of recovery begins with, "We admit that we are powerless." That is the step Paul was told to take in his battle with his "thorn in the flesh." And that is where his healing began. He came to believe that a Power greater than himself could restore him, and he made a decision to turn his will and life over to God's care.

Or as a friend in a big fight with cancer says, what I have come to "hold on to" is an unshakable faith that God extends grace to those who believe and accept it in Christ.

## II

Barbara Brown Taylor tells a story about a woman whose life was coming apart at the seams. When one of her friends told her about a silent retreat at a nearby convent, she decided to give it a try.

She had never done anything like that before. When she arrived, she received her room assignment and was standing in the dormitory elevator with her suitcase in hand when a short, portly nun stepped inside with her. The woman on retreat pressed the button for the fourth floor. The nun pressed the button for the third floor. Then the nun turned to her and said, "What brings you to us, my dear?"

The woman spilled her guts, "My mother has just died, I think my father may be an alcoholic, my marriage is falling apart, and I feel like I am going crazy."

Before she could say any more, the elevator went "ding," and the doors opened. The nun gave the woman a funny little smile. "God must love you very much," she said, and disappeared through the closing doors.

"God must love you very much?" A string of catastrophes is a sign of God's love? What the nun said does not make sense to us, but I think Paul would have understood. He had his own soliloquy about the awful things that happened to him and the conclusion that God must love him very much.

## III

Barbara Brown Taylor says, "I am not sure what that nun was trying to tell the woman in the elevator, but I think it had to do with everything that woman was about to find out, that in the very midst of her losses, with pieces of the sky still falling all around her, she was about to be more eligible than she had ever been to discover the power of Christ that is made perfect in weakness. It is the power that enables each of

us, like Paul, to think back on both the awful and wonderful things that have happened to us and say, “God must love us very much.”

We have thorns in our lives, thorns of the flesh and thorns of the spirit. If we trust in our strength and ability, we will find ourselves in a position of weakness. But if we admit we are powerless and we place trust and all that we are in God, weaknesses can be turned into strengths. And we will be amazed at what God does with our limitations, and we will find that God’s grace is sufficient.

“Above earth’s lamentation, I hear the sweet, though far off hymn that hails a new creation.” A new creation out of a severely divided, damaged nation. Those words are based on Paul’s—II Corinthians 5: “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation, everything old has passed away; see everything has become new.”

### Conclusion

It is tough out there. Some days we are tempted to think it is as tough as it has ever been. In our lives, in the lives of our friends, in our families, in our nation, in the world. Storms are shaking our inmost calm. This week, my husband and I tried writing our own verses for the song. Here is my version: Though lies are told and normalized, God’s truth, it never changeth. Christ’s sovereign rule is not denied, The power of love yet reigneth.

God does love us very much. We do not weather the storms alone. We have a Rock to whom we cling. And if we truly believe that, how can we keep from singing?