

Pastor T.C. Arnold
Sexagesima
2 Corinthians 11:19-12:9
February 8th, 2015

I know a man 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. And I know that this man was caught up in paradise – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows...

In Frances Burnett's classic book, *The Secret Garden*, little Mary Lennox, described as a sour and rude little girl, finds great excitement and joy when she, in a most forbidden way, finds herself in the midst of this place that was locked up for entire decade. It says of her first experience inside the walls of the garden, "*Then she slipped through [the door to the garden], and shut [the door] behind her, and stood with her back against it, looking about her and breathing quite fast with excitement, and wonder, and delight (pg. 74-75).*

You see, gardens have walls. Gardens are beautiful places of excitement and joy. Gardens are places of paradise. And that is good for us to know. Because that will help us understand a very difficult Epistle text appointed for this day from Paul's second letter to the Church in Corinth.

Paul does two things in the text for today. First, at the end of Chapter eleven, he defends his credentials. He explains how God has qualified him to share the good news and he explains this by showing is no different in what he has been given than all the others – "*Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I,*" says Paul. Others were saying that Paul doesn't have God's good word because He doesn't have the credentials to be God's messenger. Paul dispels that notion at the end of chapter eleven. Paul shows he is with God and the word of truth on his lips.

And then at the beginning of chapter twelve Paul shares this odd vision. Paul describes himself being caught up in the third heaven – which is another way of saying "Heaven" because there was usually a distinction between the sky that was called heaven and the universe that was called heaven and then "Heaven" that was called heaven – the "third" heaven. He wanted to make this distinction by calling Heaven, "Paradise." Now this is important, and the very reason I began the sermon this morning with a reference to the children's classic, "The Secret Garden." The word "Paradise" comes from a Persian word which means "*walled-garden.*" When a Persian king wished to confer a very special honor on someone who was especially dear to him he made him a companion of the garden, and gave him the right to walk in the royal gardens with him in close and intimate companionship.

With the experiences and hardships that Paul describes in this text, he was a companion with God. He was with God, and God with him, when he was receiving the forty lashes minus one. With God, Paul was, when labors and imprisonments were endured – and God was with him. When he was shipwrecked, when he was nearly stoned to death, dangers at sea, in the wilderness, and in the city... when Paul had hardships while facing many sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, cold and exposure... when Paul had anxiety for all the church... in the moments of great weakness, Paul walked with God in the walled-garden (not a secret garden) and God was with him. God is the King and Paul has the "special honor" given by the King to walk along side of him.

He has given you that same honor – "Paradise." We, too, have been called to walk with the Lord. "Paradise," is what we have. Yes, in what is to come, of course. We have Heaven to look forward to and there is no better place to call "Paradise" than Heaven. However, beloved in the Lord, you have Paradise now as well. How? Through the Word that comforts. Through His presence that is "for sure." Through a promise that Jesus speaks, "*I am with you always to the very end of the age.*" Hang on to that promise. It's "for sure" and we will need it.

When illness is crouching at our door – we can't seem to shake it – it has consumed us not only physically but also mentally, "Paradise" is not on our mind. When the monotony of work or school has us to believe that we are stuck and there is only a dead end ahead, "Paradise" is not our first thought. When problems in relationships, when spouses lie or deceive, when couples are not getting along, when marriage is more arduous than joy-filled, "Paradise," is not a part of our vernacular. When happiness escapes us, when sadness rules the day, when hardships become way too difficult to handle, we don't see ourselves walking in the "walled garden" with the King. Where is the King? Where is Paradise? It's not there. Hopelessness is there, but not paradise. Shame might be there, but not paradise. Guilt might rule in our heart, but not paradise in the garden.

Paul knew these places. That's why he mentioned such things in the text. Others even questioned his credentials... they said Paul was not worthy of being a preacher of the Lord. And these places become dark for us, make us believe we are disqualified from "garden walking" with the Lord. And, in yourself, you are. That's what sin does. It puts you on the outside of that garden wall. Sin separates us from the King. Sin puts us outside of His company. Sin bows to laziness, allows unjust thoughts, and allows us to walk our own path and not the Lord. Your sin takes you away from hearing what God wants you to hear, receiving what God wants you to have, and being in the presence of your fellow garden walkers. Your sin makes you believe that you don't need the paradise of the garden – that you can make your paradise – that the company of the Lord is a non-essential, maybe just too much of a personal burden (too hard). Sin will have you to believe you don't need God when times are good, but then make you think God doesn't care for you when times are bad. This is the devil's deception. This is what sin does to God's children.

We are a shipwrecked people. We have received our forty lashes minus one. We have, at times, had to defend our credentials. And I pray that we would keep on defending them. In the midst of it all – like Paul – keep the faith. It's hard. Walking with the Lord in this game called life does not feel like paradise at times. But He is still with you. Even through the field of war that we fight our personal battles, the Lord says, "*Never will I leave you. Never will I forsake you.*" That's a garden variety promise.

Beloved, we know all too well, like Paul, that life is no paradise. The race we run, the game we play, has pulled muscles, plenty of errors, and, overall, a tremendous amount of heartache. God never promised you an easy game. Perhaps sometimes our perception of what paradise actually happens to be is a bit flawed. Paradise is not an easy life. Paradise is the presence of God. And you have it. Paradise is a promise that you are His and will remain so. Paradise is hearing His Word and knowing He is with you even during the storms. Paradise is knowing that this is not forever for us. Forever is much better and that garden walk with the Lord will be seen fully one day in heaven.

Beloved, the garden is not a secret. It's an important revelation to you that God is with you – He never leaves you. The garden can take our breath away at times, but sometimes it just seems so much like everything else. But never doubt, beloved in the Lord. The Lord is with you. He is now and ever will be. This is paradise – properly understood. This Word, this Sacrament has gifted you with a grace upon grace that fills you with what you need for everlasting life in heaven. It's yours. That's the paradise in your midst. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.