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My grace is sufficient for you...for when I am weak, then I am strong.

-- As we celebrate Independence Day this weekend, we naturally think of the strength of our founding fathers, the risks they took to break away from England and their courage in founding a new nation.

--Most of us would also think that St. Paul was a strong personality. He preached fearlessly. He even stood up to Peter when he thought he was wrong. He endured multiple arrests, floggings, even a shipwreck.

-- But right here he speaks about his weakness, what he calls “a thorn in the flesh.” Since he doesn’t say what that thorn is, numerous theories have arisen among scholars. Exactly what this “thorn in the flesh” was, though, is not so important.

-- What is important is the lesson Paul learned from this. That lesson had to do with who was in charge of his life. Paul was not his own master. He had to rely on God’s grace. He had to admit his personal weakness and allow God to take over.

-- As Americans, we tend to want to be self-sufficient. We are “can-do” people. That’s not all bad. There’s a lot to be said about taking initiative. The gospel would not have been spread if there was no one willing to go out and preach God’s word to those who hadn’t heard it.

-- On the other hand, we are not independent contractors. The message we spread is not our own. And we can only do this work with the help of God’s grace.

-- Each of us has one or more “thorns in the flesh” to remind us of our human condition. Those thorns may be physical, mental, spiritual or a combination of these.

-- God still calls us to do his work despite these thorns. God invites us to rely on his grace, his unmerited aid.

-- Pope Francis reminds us of our dependence on God in his recent letter on the care of creation. The letter is about much more than global

warming. He speaks about an “integral ecology.” That means all of creation is inter-connected. And how we use or abuse the things of this earth affects all of us, especially the poor.

-- The pope throws up a caution flag against those who think that simply relying on technology or human know-how will solve problems such as climate change without us questioning our consumer habits.

-- He invites us to examine our lifestyles, and how they affect our world and particularly how they impact the poor of our world. That’s threatening to many people. He gets accused of talking about things outside his competence.

-- But he isn’t proposing technical solutions. He *is* inviting us to examine our spiritual attitudes. Do we think we are in charge? Do we think we deserve more than the poor because of our personal accomplishments?

-- Those are the type of questions a prophet asks. And prophets are not always heard in their times. Take MLK, Oscar Romero or Thomas Merton. Look how Jesus himself was treated by his neighbors.

-- God’s word invites us to look at our own attitudes. It’s usually not that hard to find the thorn in our own flesh. The challenge is to turn ourselves over to God’s grace. We have to realize we cannot do it on our own.

-- And our dependence on God should help us to be more sensitive to the poor and powerless of our world. They are reminded daily of their weakness. They usually have little or no choice about their lifestyles.

-- We who have more of a choice should heed Pope Francis’ words. We should distinguish between what we want and what we truly need. By turning ourselves over to God’s power, we will know what it means to depend upon God’s grace.