

# 'My grace is sufficient'

"It's not about the ice, is it?" his wife said to him

Watching a high school football game one fall night a few years ago, I chatted with a team doc in between injuries. We solved the world's problems and at one point discussed how we deal — or don't deal — with stress.

He told a story on himself.

Tied in emotional knots after a particularly frustrating day, he arrived home for supper. He probably closed the door a little too vigorously, probably sighed a little too conspicuously, probably greeted the kids a little too brusquely.

They noticed but said nothing. He went to the kitchen, ostensibly to help his wife set the table, the day's stress noticeably dragging behind him. His presence chilled the room.

When he placed the first glass under the ice dispenser, nothing happened. Growling, he tried again, more forcefully.

"What's wrong with this icemaker?" he snapped to no one in particular but in earshot of everyone. "Why don't you get this thing fixed?" he indirectly directed his wife.

Turning from the stove, she walked over to the refrigerator, where his hand was still lodged with a glass in the dispenser. Gently taking the glass from his hand and looking him straight in the eye, she said calmly, "It's not about the ice, is it?"

She nailed him.

No, it wasn't about the ice at all. It was about a bad day, a non-compliant patient, a feeling of failure, a sense of disappointment in himself, a lot of pent-up stuff that erupted in front of the Frigidaire. Once he told her what the day was like, he understood what was going on inside himself, and no, it wasn't about the ice at all.

## Finding the 'off' switch

His true frustrations on the table and soothed by an open ear, he could laugh at himself. And everyone could enjoy dinner.

I appreciated his story because we both understood how things can so easily get twisted within and around us, and how a nagging worry or family concern can leave us pointing fingers and grousing at everyone in the vicinity. And we don't even know why.

At times we are puzzles to ourselves. We ask why we said this or did that. Likewise, when a co-worker or family member thunders past us, leaving an angry cloud of dust in his or her wake, we wonder what's going on inside.

I used to joke with a priest who served as principal of a high school that I could always tell when he had had a bad day because about 6 p.m. he would slam the door to the garage and start cleaning the rectory.

Apparently St. Paul surprised himself repeatedly. To the Corinthians he wrote about the thorn in the flesh that afflicted and exasperated him (2 Cor 12), and to the Romans he wrote, "What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate" (Rom 7:15).

Like the rest of us, he would have preferred to find the "off" switch to struggles within and without, but such a switch did not and does not exist.

## 'Content with weaknesses'

For at least some of the unnamed stressors of the day there is a simple antidote: reflection. And for all of them there is God's response, the same he gave to Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).

I learned a few years ago that when in the course of the day I find myself worried or irritable, aware of a shadow following me around, a moment of private reflection helps put things in perspective. I ask myself one question: "What happened today to create that cloud, to make me feel this way?"



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Almost always I can identify something — an angry letter, worry about a loved one, a word spoken but later regretted — that I had been dragging through the day. Identifying it and asking God to shed his light on it, I get out from under the cloud and move freely through the day.

But there is also a kind of permanent life stance that Paul eventually learned to take, that of trusting in God's strength and not one's own. "I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me. Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:9-10).

## The morning offering

There is a venerated Catholic tradition worth reviving, the "Morning Offering." I learned it as a child, and I have lived in many rectories where the prayer was pasted on the bathroom mirror, as it is in Connolly House, the archbishop's residence in Seattle.

"O Jesus, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary, I offer you all my prayers, works, joys, and sufferings of this day, for all the intentions of your Sacred Heart, in union with the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass throughout the world, in reparation for my sins, for the intentions of all my relatives and friends and in particular for the intentions of the Holy Father."

A prayer of self-offering takes the focus — and the burden — off ourselves. A day can so easily become all about "me." By offering it to "Him," we gain direction and focus.

Gradually we learn to recognize God's presence even in the midst of stress, and we hear him whisper repeatedly, "My grace is sufficient for you."