

“A House Not Made With Hands”

Valley Presbyterian Church – June 10, 2018

3rd Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 138

Rev. John Wahl

2 Corinthians 4:13 – 5:1

Our Muslim brothers and sisters are currently observing Ramadan with a month-long fast. During daylight, observant Muslims abstain from food, drink and a number of activities that are deemed to be pleasurable – all in order to call attention to God’s revelation and deliverance. In 2018, Ramadan began on the evening of May 15 and ends on June 14. Of particular significance are the final few days of the period when Laylat al Qada, or the Night of Power, is celebrated, when it is believed that God’s angel commanded Muhammed to begin to recite the Quran. In the US, this special night will be celebrated tonight, June 10, as many will spend the entire night inside the mosque reciting special prayers.

In Ramadan, Muslims speak not only of fasting from food and drink, but also fasting of the hands and fasting of the tongue. Doing good deeds is an emphasis. In addition, people pay attention to how they relate to one another and what they say to each other. Fasting hopefully points to what is important and fosters greater self-control. Through fasting and remembrance, Muslims cultivate the perspective that what is permanent should take precedence over what is temporary. Thus, fasting becomes more than a health practice as spiritual thoughts and activities take the place of thoughts about food and drink – they fast from something of temporal value to remember what is of ultimate value.¹

Christians could be reminded by Muslims about how fasting might restore the value of the permanent: that living is more than the sum total of what we eat and drink and who we relate to. In this passage from 2 Corinthians, Paul might also help us realize that the permanent values of the Kingdom of God which we await must connect to daily living; and that in so doing, our inner nature becomes renewed. Similar to Muslims, whatever the hands of Christians touch and whatever the tongue says must be shaped by our understanding of the eternal. Just as we confess “He is Risen, indeed!” on Easter Sunday, so we can bear witness to the resurrection in the way that we live each day. A Christian life shaped by eternal values reveals that the message of the resurrection is not just words about an empty

¹ Robert Smith, “Living in a changing world shaped by eternal values”

tomb, but is true and life-changing. We, like Paul, can proclaim, “I believed, and so I speak.”

The Apostle Paul that we encounter in Scripture – a fervent persecutor of the Christian faith who was dramatically transformed into one of its greatest evangelists – was one of the world’s first “bi-vocational” pastors. His day job was tent-making. And so, it is not surprising that in the final verse of today’s passage, he reaches for a tent metaphor when describing what was happening to his physical body in the midst of ongoing persecution.

“My outward tent is wasting away,” Paul writes. The fabric is torn, rain is getting in, the original color has faded to a dull gray. Half the tent pegs have been lost and the cords have frayed to almost nothing. One strong wind and this old tent could be knocked down to a flattened mess.²

How can Paul keep his chin up and keep going on behalf of the Kingdom of God when his earthly tent is in tatters? Because through Jesus, he understands a larger, more permanent truth: that there is a divine tent-maker who is even now designing and fashioning something that is wonderful and new. This earthly tent is not the end of the story; not by a long shot.

Each of us, over time, become aware of the wasting away of our earthly tents. It may not be – as it was, apparently, for Paul – because of persecution. More likely, instead, it is the forty-something mother who senses that even when doctors chase away breast cancer cells, they could so easily appear somewhere else. Or, it is the sixty-something man who realizes that he is losing a step on the tennis court or at the office. Or, it is the eighty-something couple who realize that one or the other is not just having trouble remembering names anymore as a normal part of aging, but that sometimes it is hard to remember what they went to the store to buy or how to get back home.

We all have witnessed, or in some way experienced, that our earthly tents are fraying or wasting away. But the hope of the gospel is that there is a tent-maker who is even now sewing and stitching together something new for each of us – something quite extraordinary. Therefore, we do not lose heart. Our various troubles may not seem light or temporary, but in the face of eternity, they are; for whatever tattering or fading we experience now, it will give way to something glorious. While that does not mean that the destruction of our earthly tents is not a big deal, it does mean that is not the final deal. Fixing our eyes on the eternal

² Scott Hoezee from *Center for Preaching Excellence*

things of Christ helps us to not lose heart; not ultimately, not as the last word to anyone's life.

This seems to me an especially appropriate text to consider this morning in the wake of two very public and unexpected deaths by suicide this past week. Both Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain were, by outward appearances, successful people, in the prime of their lives; they leave behind family members, friends and fans with many unanswered questions about their hidden demons.

Paul speaks in this passage about what is seen and unseen. While we see what is on the outside, we struggle to understand the full ramifications of depression and mental illness that for so many people remain hidden. Paul speaks in the scriptures about some particular affliction that he faced; one that many people have speculated about, but we do not know what it was. This is that case for many people; what is eating away at their earthly tents remains unseen.

These earthly tents we carry are not ultimately secure. The physical spaces we identify with – bodies, homes, churches, even cities and nations – can all be destroyed. The social spaces that define us – our interpersonal relationships, spheres of influence, even our cultural identities – are not ultimately and completely in our control. But amid the insecurity of these temporal, earthly tents, Paul reminds us that we have a building from God, a house not made of human hands. What is created within and among us through faith is God's overflowing, freely given reign of justice and mercy. Through faith, our lives can become a more expansive domain of grace.

When we are able to live a life not focused on temporal things, but a life of love so that others can experience a greater sense of joy and justice, we reveal the life of Christ. This is why Paul perseveres in the midst of outer persecution, and his more mysterious, inner affliction; he does not fear the end to his earthly life, but understands that God has called upon him to give of himself for the sake of others.

For a more recent example of this, we look to the civil rights movement and the numerous imprisonments, beatings, slanderous attacks and bombings that its leaders and participants endured. While these trials certainly depleted them physically and emotionally, they produced a transformation that has led to enduring and ongoing progress in the decades since. They demonstrated that the power to nonviolently resist and suffer through such demeaning experiences came from God and not themselves. They – borrowing Paul's words in last week's

reading from earlier in chapter 4 – were “hard pressed but not crushed, perplexed, but not in despair, persecuted but not abandoned, struck down but not destroyed.”

It is easy to want to stop and ask, *why are we doing this?* or *what is the purpose when we don't seem to be getting anywhere?* But, Paul reminds us, “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”

Friends, believe this good news: God, the master tent-maker, is even now at work in the world – in us, around us and ahead of us. Though it might seem, at times, that the places and things, and even the people around us are wasting away, we are daily being prepared to experience renewal. Something new is being built; not by human, but divine hands. Some, like Paul, call this heaven; Jesus more often described it as the Kingdom of God – not temporal, but eternal and forever in God's presence. In this rests both our hope and our calling. AMEN.