

“By Faith, Not by Sight”

Valley Presbyterian Church – June 16, 2024

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

Introduction

This season after Pentecost is, in the church, called *Ordinary Time*. Though not necessarily consistent with its original meaning, it is an appropriate time to discuss ordinary things: such as how we conduct our lives, as Christians, in this sometimes challenging and changing world; how we navigate, using the lens of our faith, through the pitfalls and uncertainties that are part of the human condition.

Our passage from today begins in the middle of a letter Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth about living in this season of earthly life – what he calls being *at home in the body* – in light of the promise that another, eternal life – being *at home with the Lord* – awaits.

But the passage begins, and Paul as reminds his readers again, that *since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart*. (4:1) The mysteries and hardships of life are – in Paul’s eyes – temporary, but whose we are and what we do are eternal, it is – as Paul describes it – like treasure held within a clay pot.

Today’s reading is in chapter 5, verses 1-10, but, if you have not done so, I encourage you, at some point, to go back and read this section from the start of chapter 4. Let’s listen, now, for God’s word...

Read 2 Corinthians 5:1-10

Two Sundays ago, when we first looked at this second letter of Paul to the Christians in Corinth, we were introduced to the image of *treasure in clay jars*. Our bodies are fragile and vulnerable to chipping and cracking, to aching hands and sore knees. Paul believes that these physical problems are everyday reminders of Christ’s death and our association with it. Likewise, our moments of joy and delight, forgiveness and reconciliation are windows into the life of Jesus; his resurrection being revealed through our bodily existence.

Today’s reading begins with the similar image of our bodies as *earthly tents*. Over time, these bodies are subjected to hardship and will eventually be destroyed, but what awaits us is a new heavenly building – eternal rather than temporary – that comes from God. For Paul, the alternative to our bodily existence is not life without a body. Like

earthenware vessels, these afflicted, suffering human bodies are where God's treasure is borne. Life is bodily.¹

One of the consistent themes of Paul's letters is his insistence that his ministry – like all servants of Jesus – is to be judged by God and not by human standards. Paul's critics might look at his physical weakness – his old (by first century standards), beat up, scarred body and his flawed speaking skills – and they would find no evidence of the glory of Christ he proclaims. In the ancient world, bodily scars from beatings and lashings were considered a sign of shame and dishonor. Yet, Paul argues that his scars – physical and otherwise – authenticate his ministry; for they are a sign of his participation in Christ's suffering and death in order to bring life to others.

Thus, Paul emphasizes – as we heard in last Sunday's reading – the importance of looking *not at what can be seen, but what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.* (4:16-18) Confusing or contradictory as this language may seem, Paul is not speaking about ethereal existence, but real life. What we do, as well as what happens to us, matters. It makes a real difference to the communities of which we are a part; and it also matters to God.²

Thus, when Paul says, in today's reading, that *we walk by faith, not by sight* (5:7) it might again be confounding. Is faith some sort of knowledge that we can learn? For many parts of the Christian tradition, faith is what comes after statements like "I believe that..." or "I confess that..." We have trepidation about *blind faith*, for it has led many people to ignore the signs around them and cause poor choices or harmful acts.

So often, faith has been set up as the enemy of knowledge, science, or reason. Religion has been used to buffer people from inquiries and advances in truth; whether the idea deemed too dangerous was a Copernican solar system or evolution or the efficacy of a vaccine. Paul, who lived in a pre-scientific age, is not arguing against learning and discovery; instead, he argues that outward appearances are not always what they seem to be. God, in Christ, reveals that power can be found in humility and weakness; that the ultimate goal of life is not dominance and wealth, but to do what is right in God's eyes, even if the reward is not immediate.

On this Father's Day, and in light of these writings of Paul, I am reminded of the ways that fathers (my own and others) often are characterized. What's wrong with all those corny "dad jokes;" or with wearing dress socks with your tennis shoes when you are working in the yard? Who is going to see us out there, anyway? Who needs to read the directions to assemble a bike or look at a map to find their way? After all, *we walk by faith and not by sight.*

¹ *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, vol. XI

² Elisabeth Johnson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

What Paul means by this saying is that in order to be transformed by and into the likeness of Christ, we must rely on, or put our trust in, God's grace. Wherever we are, and whatever we do, we are accountable to God – and, thus, to one another – for what we do in these bodies, these *earthly tents*, whether for good or evil. Fathers are not meant to dominate families and, despite the patriarchal society of which Paul lived in, men should not exclusively rule the world.

There exists, in our world today, a movement to reclaim these traditional definitions of masculinity. The principles of dominance and power are fundamentally incompatible with living in the ways of Jesus. Faith in God, and in the belief that all of humanity is created in the image of God, means that we treat each other with decency and respect – regardless of gender, nationality, status, or religion. To do otherwise means we are relying instead on outward appearance. What we do, and how we treat one another and the God's creation, matters.

This same truth extends to our churches, as well. Even today, too many faith traditions and institutions are stuck in the ancient, patriarchal social structures that Paul lived as a part of. Father's Day should be a time to honor and celebrate the ways that the men in our lives and in our churches have led, nurtured, and provided; but also an opportunity to re-imagine how our institutions should be structured to honor and respect the role and contribution of all participants.

I am excited that, at the upcoming General Assembly gathering of our denomination, we will be acting on the recommendation to elect the first woman to the position of Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church, USA. The Rev. Jihyun Oh, currently director of Mid-Council Ministries in the Office of the General Assembly, is Korean-American, born in Seoul and raised in Kansas, and a former ICU chaplain at a level-one trauma hospital. She is poised to help guide our church in this increasingly multi-racial and ecumenical world.

In an interview following her nomination, Oh said:

I think there is something important about who we are as Presbyterians in the world right now and who we are called to become. That feels like an important question people are asking: What does it mean as a smaller denomination and in smaller congregations with various forms of leadership. What does it mean to be who we are in a particular tradition? Being in communion together in a particular way, what does it mean to the witness of Jesus Christ, in our place, our identity, in terms of what we can offer?³

As a part of the Reformed tradition, the Presbyterian Church, USA has been seeking to discover new ways to live out our calling within the larger Christian family.

³ Mike Ferguson, *Presbyterian News Service*

We are already in full communion with several other denominations, allowing ministers and mission workers to labor in different settings without restrictions. There is a continual effort to create more local and national partnerships for these shared ministries, especially as the available human and material resources become more precious. I trust that Paul would believe that our distinct traditions – these *clay jars* and *earthly tents* we inhabit – should not deter our joint efforts to pursue greater justice, peace, and mission in the world.

As the world around us continues to change, we must continue to ponder Paul's counsel that we should *walk by faith, and not by sight*. Outward appearances might keep us separated, but a common commitment to the way of Christ – to serving with humility and celebrating diversity – can bring us together.

This is one of the reasons I am also excited for this coming Saturday's *Rise Against Hunger* food packaging event, and that we are doing it in partnership with our friends at Christ Presbyterian Church in Chesterland. Even if only for a couple hours, we will have the chance to work side-by-side with these fellow followers of Jesus, understanding that we will accomplish more – in this case putting together more meals for those in need – than we could by ourselves. As we share in this labor, learning, and conversation together, we bridge this small distance – one of about a dozen miles up Chillicothe Road – to inspire us to seek ways to navigate greater divides.

As we live into the reality of being a smaller congregation in a smaller denomination within an increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-faith society, creating partnerships and learning how to bridge divides will only grow more important. As the church and its people, we can either fear and lament this changing world – stuck in grief for what already has been or might be lost – or, instead, we can seek to embrace the need to adapt and to learn and to find other organizations and people with whom we can enter partnerships.

Sometime, reading Paul's words, such choices appear to be binary: earthly or eternal, old or new, faith or sight. But we understand that life – this bodily, sometimes joyful, often difficult created existence – is rarely so black-and-white. We can, at the same time, celebrate possibilities and lament the pain of change; we can look forward to that which is being made new and grieve what is being lost.

After all, we are humans; our bodies are clay jars, prone to cracking and chipping; we all bear physical and emotional scars. But God has created us to be vessels for a treasure within; to be filled with the love and grace revealed by Jesus. We are the hands and feet and heart of Christ; what we do matters to God and to one another. Thanks be to God. Amen.