

“We Do Not Lose Heart”

Valley Presbyterian Church – June 9, 2024

Third Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 138

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

2 Corinthians 4:13-18

Last Sunday, in our first look into this second Letter of Paul to the Christians in Corinth, we heard that God has chosen mortal bodies in which to display God’s power. God transforms these bodies which are so fragile and vulnerable to chips and cracks that Paul likens them to jars of clay. According to Paul, the reason that God has chosen such fragile vessels is to make clear that “this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” (v.7) The good news of new life in Christ is only possible because a powerful God is at work.

What is remarkable in this passage is not that our *outer nature* is wasting away. The frailty of the human condition is not newsworthy. Truly amazing is that Paul can say, in the midst of hardship, that there is hope. The Apostle’s certainty in God’s power gives him the strength necessary to face any obstacle. Since Paul has faith that the God who raised Jesus will also raise up those who are in Jesus, he can say with confidence, “we do not lose heart.” (v. 16)

Paul can maintain hope in the midst of adversity and can subject his body to physical and emotional hardships because he knows with all certainty that God’s grace is sufficient to renew and restore him day-by-day; so that he might continue to speak and live out the gospel.

Today’s passage states the heart of the Christian message of resurrection: “we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence.” (v. 14) The restoration of the crucified Jesus to life is a guarantee of the universal offer that God makes to us: that if you believe, you will have life restored to your dying or dead body.

Still, as much as this belief in the resurrection might serve as the foundation for our faith, we, like Paul, embrace its mystery. This incomprehensible mixing of life and death is more than the words available to describe it: different from resuscitation, reformation, and restoration. We are not merely being renewed as if

we were some overdue library book. Instead, day-by-day, God making us new is both present reality and eternal hope.¹

Resurrection life is apparent not only in the absence of suffering or strife, but also – and at times even especially – in the midst of these, as God’s Spirit is present and working to bring new life in ways often unseen. Our suffering, in itself, is not redemptive, but it is an inevitable part of living the gospel life of truth in a world where the powers of death and deception are still at work; until, that is, the fullness of God’s purpose is realized.

Thus, we live in an in-between time. We have seen the resurrection of Jesus, God’s great gift to us, and yet we our own experience of this promised new life is not yet complete. Still, God is present in fractured and broken lives, relationships, and communities; working to bring new life out of pain and division. Life in the Spirit compels us to selfless and other-oriented service that may be costly to ourselves, but are expressions of the future we claim in hope.²

Faith, then, is not just a weakened or imperfect form of knowledge; it is not just about believing in some doctrine that provides a guarantee for immortal existence. Rather, faith has to do with grace – God’s freely given gift for all – which shifts the focus from self-preservation to the interests of others. As this grace extends to more and more people through us and the message of the gospel, it will increase in thanksgiving for the lives of others that overflow with grace.

Consider the dramatic expansion of grace that has taken place in many of our lifetimes. The first ordination of women to ministry in our denomination – the earliest to do so – happened less than seventy years ago. The passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act – ensuring the right of the ballot to people of every race – took place sixty years ago. In 1978, More Light Presbyterians – an organization supporting LGBTQ+ ordination and same-sex marriage – was formed, followed by the like-minded Covenant Network of Presbyterians in the 1990’s. After repeated attempts to change the language of the Book of Order, our denomination finally approved, in 2011, an inclusive and affirming policy for all members and ministers.

This expansion of grace rarely happens, as Paul would surely attest, apart from hardship and opposition. Even after these historic milestones in women’s, civil, and LGBTQ+ rights, we have witnessed movements of backlash as the newly

¹ David Frederickson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

² Jennifer Vija Pietz from *WorkingPreacher.com*

enfranchised become targets of scrutiny and blame. And yet, when this grace, as Paul says, “extends to more and more people,” (v. 15) it offers reason for thanksgiving and proclaims God’s glory.

Paul writes to the Galatians, “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Jesus Christ.” (3:28) Thus, even if we are not the direct beneficiaries of this expanding grace, we are called to be proponents and allies for those being lifted into full inclusion.

So, when questions arise in church or society about women in leadership, those of us who are being made new in Christ ought to be proponents for full equality and opportunity. When we hear people condemning the validity of Juneteenth celebrations, we should defend them; or, if we don’t really know the story of its origins, do some research about it on our own. And when we hear whispered questioning about the need for, or even the safety of, holding Pride events in Geauga County, maybe we should consider showing up in Chardon on the 15th or in Burton on the 22nd, to see for ourselves and offer these friends and neighbors our support.

I realize and appreciate that, in the midst of this fractured, partisan moment, it can be hard to stand up or speak out when we know it might incite arguments or ruffle feathers. Many of us were taught that it was impolite to bring up topics like politics and religion; and that staying silent will allow us to maintain greater peace.

But when it comes to being inclusive of and welcoming to all people, the issue is not one of any particular arm of politic or religion; it is about human rights. We believe that each of us is created in the image of God; that we are all sisters and brothers in the same human family. The death and resurrection of Jesus represents God’s gift to each and all of us; the mercy of God is deeper and wider than any of us might imagine. And so, if anyone is beyond the reach of God’s grace, it would be for some reason that we cannot even fathom.

Thus, Paul’s faith gives him the confidence to say to the Corinthians: “we do not lose heart.” (v. 16) “For,” the Apostle continues, “this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for a weight of glory beyond all measure.” (v. 17) The eternal *weight of glory* stands in contrast with the *lightness* of the present, temporary affliction.³ It is not unlike the heavy yoke that Jesus, in Matthew’s gospel offers to take in exchange for his lighter burden. We are able to bear this

³ Cynthia Briggs Kitteridge from *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 3

weight because of the new and re-formed life that we are promised by God. Day-by-day, the challenges and afflictions of life that we face – personal or systemic, deserved or not – can be exchanged for the redeemed and restored Spirit of Christ which provides us perseverance, strength, and hope.

It is the expanding grace of God, and the promised glory beyond measure, that gives the church – *reformed and always reforming* – the courage to continually change. Over the next few weeks, as our denomination prepares its General Assembly gathering and I serve as one of our Presbytery's commissioners, we will be looking at some examples of what this emerging, ever-reforming church might look like in different contexts.

Today, we will be watching a short video about a new worshipping community that has emerged in Washington State allowing women to share their experiences of harm and claim the healing and redemptive power of Christ. This story serves as an example of expanding grace that accepts those who previously did not feel they had a faith home. The surrounding churches have welcomed and encouraged this new ministry and helped it to thrive.

Re-imagining and re-forming, our expressions of what church does and is can be scary; change is hard. But, as Paul reminds us, the slight, temporary hardship of resurrection – being made new – will be outweighed by the glory of God's ever-expanding grace and immeasurable glory. In this is our hope; and, thus, we do not lose heart. Thanks be to God. Amen.