

“We Do Not Lose Heart” GPPC 6-10-18
Psalm 138, 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

Late yesterday morning I decided to take my one-person kayak up to Belews Lake to fish for about an hour. There were other things on my to-do list. So I rushed around and got ready, stowed the fishing gear in the back of the car, hoisted the kayak onto the roof carrier, and battened it down with rope and bungee cords.

Once I got to Belews Lake I looked in my tackle box and saw that my fishing license had expired two days ago. No fishing for me. I left the fishing gear in the car. Stuck my wallet, cell phone, prescription glasses, and all my keys, except my car key, into the glove compartment and locked the car. Donning a lifejacket, big floppy hat, and sunglasses I pushed off from the shore and headed into the lake. There were a few other kayakers, in larger kayaks, and various fishing boats, pontoon boats, and fast motorboats. Paddling along the shoreline, I mainly avoided the center of the lake where the big boats lived and moved and had their being.

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I was feeling peaceful, at one with the lake. After 30 minutes or so I was paddling back toward my car, probably less than a quarter mile away. And I noticed that the speed boats were creating some really impressive waves. But I was doing fine, until I wasn't. A big wave hit the kayak from the side and the whole thing flipped over in deep water. I swallowed some lake, but thank God for the lifejacket and the paddle was tied to the kayak. My floppy hat, sandals, and a tube of cherry-flavored Chapstick floated nearby. I grabbed them. My engraved Swiss Army knife was still in my pocket, and I thought the car key was too. I tried to right the kayak, but couldn't. So I just held on to it, and kicked my way to the closest shore where I finally righted my ship, the U.S.S. Disaster Area. I felt in my pocket again and sure enough, my pocketknife was still there. But guess what wasn't. My car key.

I paddled to the shore near my car and hauled everything up to the car. A fellow boater agreed to let me borrow his phone to call Beth. She was in Greensboro and happened to be on the phone talking to a relative. So the call went straight to her voicemail. I left a message (paraphrased). "I'm fine. Here's where I think my spare car key is. Please bring it to me

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at the Piney Bluff Boat Access. Here's the address. Thanks." The boater's wife took a photo of the sign at the dock with the address and texted it to Beth. A smart, kind soul! About an hour and a half later, Beth arrived. She couldn't find the spare key. She drove me home and I found it. She drove me back out and I was able to drive my car and the kayak home. Thank goodness this whole quick relaxing fishing trip only took about four hours. I'm not sure how much more relaxing I could stand.

Sometimes our lives are overturned with a comedy of errors; we can laugh then or later, maybe much later. But other times what's going on is serious and painful. Strained relationships. Divorces. Job stresses. Bullies. Grief. Loneliness. The grinding pain and exhaustion and worry of serious illness. The waves surprise us and they come hard and fast. And where's the lifejacket? And where's the car key? Life is difficult sometimes.

As we read the fourth chapter of 2 Corinthians, it seems Paul is going through a hard time himself. Verses 3-4 apparently show people are complaining that Paul's proclamation of the gospel is unclear. (A

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preacher who's hard to follow—imagine that.) Then in verses 8-9 Paul says, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed...” Life is difficult. People are questioning Paul's authority. “Hey, Paul, if you're a *real* apostle, why're you having to endure so much pain and adversity?”

In spite of the fact that not only Paul but Jesus and Job suffer unjustly, we still tend to think that if things are going badly for someone, he or she must have done something wrong to cause it. And we ourselves are doing well, because we were smarter, or more virtuous, or more careful. “Paul, if only you'd been a better preacher, the church would have been a greater success.” “Melinda, if only you'd lived a more wholesome life, you wouldn't have gotten sick.” “Sam, if only you'd been wiser, you wouldn't have lost your job when the company downsized.”

It ain't necessarily so.

What does Paul do in response to his adversity? Blame himself? Quit the church? Give up the faith? Put his trust not in God but in Greek

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philosophy and the Sunday New York Times? No. He keeps right on preaching the good news. He says, “We also believe, and so we speak, because 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.”

In spite of all that’s happening, Paul does not sink into despair. Instead, he says God raised Jesus from the dead, and God’s going to raise us with Jesus and bring us into his presence. “So,” says Paul, “we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day.”

John Mellencamp sang of his teenage years, “We were young and we were improvin’.” Well, Paul isn’t a kid anymore (nobody’s going to be a kid forever). And Paul sees his body not improvin’ but declining just as we see our own bodies adding wrinkles, gray hair (or losing hair), various ailments (do you have a half-hour to hear about them?), and daily moving closer and closer to the end. As the poet T.S. Eliot wrote, “I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker, And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker, And in short, I was afraid.”

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Maybe there are days when we feel that way, nervous, or even scared about our mortality.

But Paul is not afraid. He's not overly concerned about his outer nature, because he says "our inner nature is being renewed day by day." By this Paul does not mean the heretical notion of a good "inner spark" waiting to be released from its bondage to a bad outer body. Instead, as one scholar explains, "The 'outer person' is one's mortal existence, which inevitably passes away; the 'inner person' is one's identity as a child of God, and that is constantly being reaffirmed (4:16)." (Victor Paul Furnish in *Harpers Bible Commentary*, 1195.)

As followers of Christ, no matter what else is going on in our lives, we're reminded daily that you and I are treasured children of God. And even in the midst of adversity, *especially* in the midst of adversity, God is at work regenerating us. A New Testament scholar says Paul is "expressing the glad certainty that each day he is renewed and strengthened as a Christian and lifted above all external pressures." (Johannes Behm in *TDNT, Vol. III*, 452.) It's not just that God is with us and that

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we are treasured by God. It's also that God is doing something remarkable in us daily, especially when we go through something hard.

A retired pastor says, "Over the years I have been much nurtured by a band of persons I regard as 'the holy resilient.' When subjected to the fiercest pressures of change, the holy resilient do not just endure or bounce back. They become more: more compassionate, deeper, simpler in their desires, and more focused in how they use their time. Resilience for them is not a matter of getting back to normal, nor is it about adjusting as well as they can. It is about transformation." (Steve Doughty in *Weavings*, Vol. XXVIII, Number 2, 5.)

Our outer nature is wasting away, but our inner nature is being made new every day. For those who choose to participate with God, it's not just about endurance; it's about transformation by God's Spirit.

Paul goes on to say, "For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure..."

This is also encouraging, but honestly when we're in pain, when we're grieving, confused, angry, scared, we may want to say, "You

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know, Paul. This doesn't feel like a 'slight momentary affliction.' This feels awful, and it feels endless.”

That's honest, isn't it? When we're suffering, we don't have to pretend that we're fine. We don't have to lie in order to make other people feel better.

Now I'm not talking about complaining all the time, turning into a constant grumbler or a whiner. I don't mean wallowing in misery or oversharing intimate details of our lives with people who may not know us that well.

But I mean the church should be a community in which we can be honest about what's happening in our lives, especially as we build relationships over the months and years. If somebody asks, “How are you doing?” You don't have to paste on a fake smile and say, “I'm just fine.” Instead, you can say, “It's not easy.” Or “I'm struggling.”

And if we're really in deep depression and contemplating hurting ourselves instead there is always help and hope. Suicide is not the right answer. When we're honest, church members, church staff, and mental

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health professionals can respond. But it begins with honesty about that “slight momentary affliction.”

Even though he talks about what he’s facing as a “slight momentary affliction,” Paul himself does not deny how difficult his life as a follower of Christ is. Paul’s faithfulness and obedience to Christ have brought affliction to him, just as our own faithfulness and obedience to Christ may also bring us affliction. Again and again in his letters, Paul names and claims the various sufferings he deals with—beatings, imprisonments, slander.

But what Paul is saying is that in comparison to the “eternal weight of glory beyond all measure” that’s coming, whatever he faces is *not* more than he can endure. That’s true for us too, isn’t it? Paul says we do not lose heart. Because we look beyond what’s visible to the naked eye. The naked eye can only see things that are temporary. But we look beyond with the eyes of faith to see that which is eternal. Paul says, “If the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” In other words, even though our bodies are unique and precious, they are temporary like a

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tent. But each of us is going to receive a new body, “a building from God” that is utterly sturdy and eternal. And if all that is true, (and it is), then we’re granted a peculiar courage in the midst of our fears.

We know we are embodied followers of Christ who will encounter adversity and suffering not in spite of our faithfulness but often because of our faithfulness. Following Jesus gets us into all sorts of trouble. I remember hearing about some of our church members going on a mission trip to DC a few years ago, and how frightening it was one night as they tried to care for some desperately needy people. Our congregation members were scared, but they were also brave.

If you read the *Greensboro News & Record* newspaper on a regular basis, you’ll also see a lot of letters to the editor and sometimes other pieces written by our members. Again and again they talk about how our Christian faith calls us to live in the public square with care for the weak and an eye toward what is best not just for us but for future generations. Our members speak out about the environment, about immigration reform, racism, the social safety net, hunger, poverty, governmental and personal accountability. And what they say is not

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always popular. But they say it because it's something they feel called by God to say and they have been granted this strange courage that calls them to say and do what is uncomfortable.

And because of what we believe about life and death and the life that is coming, we also approach our own "wasting away," with a strange disposition.

Presbyterian writer and poet Kathleen Norris says, "I relish the contemplative poet Robert Lax's response to the question of whether growing old—he was then in his eighties—had led him to fear death. 'When the time comes,' he said, 'we pick up our duds and return to where we came from. We're all brought into this life because heaven loves us, and back to that love we go.'" (Kathleen Norris, *Acedia & Me*, 257-258.)

The waves hit us sudden and hard. But we do not lose heart. We look ahead with eyes of faith. Dealing with the "slight momentary affliction." Being honest with each other, giving help and receiving help, and in our struggles being transformed daily by God. We trust in the resurrection, the coming weight of glory beyond all measure, a building

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from God, unshakeable, eternal in the heavens. Dazzling. Amen. ©Jeff

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