

We DO NOT Lose Heart

2 Corinthians 4:16-5:1

So we do not lose heart.

Even though our outer nature is wasting away,
our inner nature is being renewed day by day.

For this slight momentary affliction
is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory
beyond all measure,
because we look not at what can be seen
but at what cannot be seen;
for what can be seen is temporary,
but what cannot be seen is eternal.

For we know that 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.

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2 Corinthians 4:16 - 5:1

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I.

I begin this morning by telling you I find within me a great sense of urgency in preaching today's scripture reading from 2 Corinthians and the claim it puts upon us. Urgent as is necessary, immediate, and important. That said, while I have great urgency in *proclaiming* this message, I seem to have had a lack of urgency in actually writing the sermon through which such a proclamation must be made. A bit of an odd juxtaposition, to be sure. However, one which is not unusual or in anyway unexpected. Before we get into *that* particular aspect of the operation, though, let us first deal with the text in broader strokes.

II.

Though there is much to draw on in today's scripture reading there are two things going on in this passage which we need to recognize in order to better understand it; one philosophical, one practical. As we've touched on before, the theology of the Apostle Paul arises, in part, from the Platonic school of thought which believes the contents of the physical world we see and experience are but mere and poor imitations derived from their true forms or ideals which exist in some other ethereal plane of existence (See [Allegory of the Cave](#) in [The Republic](#)).

That Paul's theology is tinged, or even tainted, by the thinking of Plato is an age-old criticism, and one that is not incorrect. Such an influence surely underlies the stark dichotomies of which Paul often speaks: the seen and the unseen, the fleeting and the eternal, and the flesh and the spirit.

III.

This can be found throughout the Pauline corpus of writings, and have resulted in a number of unfortunate derivative ideas which have arisen over the centuries; chief among them the disregard, or disdain, for the created world, the feminine and its generative nature, and, of course, human sexuality in general. Though all of this is problematic, to be sure, let us remember that

first and foremost the Apostle Paul was not a philosopher but a pastor. His writings, and the thinking behind them, do not arise out of the abstract, but from the practical considerations of the churches and their congregations in his charge and under his care. The second letter to church at Corinth wasn't written so that 2000 years later we all might sit around here this morning and discuss its merit or application to our lives. Instead, Paul is addressing a very specific context and set of circumstances: the suffering and afflictions endured by those, like him, laboring for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

IV.

Last week we considered the verses which lead up to today's text where Paul says he and his fellow workers have been "*afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.*" It is, therefore, with a *pastoral* sensibility that Paul juxtaposes an earthly tent being destroyed with a building in the heavens made not with human hands.

In a world where there was little hope that the burdens of one's life would lessen, true hope would need to be found in the next world. Such a final reward has always been the hallmark and centerpiece of the Christian faith, for it is the ultimate goal of eternal life which is faith's greatest victory; what Paul calls "*an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure.*" Settling for a hope which is anything less than this hollows the cross of its full consequence and benefit.

V.

However, while Paul *needed* to turn to and employ this greatest hope for those in the church at Corinth, and all those being oppressed and impoverished by the world, we have the privilege of exacting an additional and extra measure of grace from the cross of Christ; to guild the lily if you will.

We gather here every Sunday, in-person and virtually, to celebrate and stand in the promise which some day awaits us: of a house in the heavens made from the hands of God. However, in coming together each week we also serve to remind ourselves of both the challenges and the joys of living in this earthy tent of ours in the here and now.

VI.

While I sure it has been quite a long time since most of us have been tent camping, it is one of those experiences in life which leaves a lasting impression. There, alone with your own thoughts with just a thin fabric to serve as shelter, one feels the weight of the woods and the wilderness all around you. One soon discovers one's own vulnerability, and how small each of us really is in the grand scheme of the world; and, this realization can easily turn one's aloneness into loneliness.

One quickly comes to appreciate that nothing comes easy with tent life: the bugs, the weather, the grit and grime, the heat, the cold, the sweat, the effort required to stay safe, and clean and to simply prepare a decent meal. And, regardless of how good one's tent, we just have to accept that at some point, and on some nights, we're *going* to get wet, and we are *going* to be miserable.

VII.

Life in the earthly tent is not so very different. It is tough going, a hard slog, and not for the faint of heart. At some point along the way, though, one wakes up to the fact that tent camping, and life in this earthly tent of ours, is not an end in and of itself, but the price one pays for the mountain-top experience, the glorious sunset, the inspiring sunrise, the vista, the view, the renewed sense of self, the opportunity to discover the awe to be found in the flora, fauna and beauty of the natural world, all of which brings a great satisfaction for having made the climb, taken the hike, or embarked upon the journey.

Yes, while it is absolutely true that a hot shower, a home-cooked meal and sleeping under a roof in one's own bed are things to which we will always eagerly await and joyously imagine, just like that house made in heaven by the hands of God, merely knowing that such a place awaits us is enough to see us through the journey and allow us to appreciate and enjoy what we have in the here and now; on the trail and in the tent.

VIII.

In either instance, what determines the outcome of the experience is the attitude and posture one takes in going through it. Do we seek to focus on our scarcity or on our bounty? Do we foster gripes or gratitude? Do we feel

only the burden or will we find the beauty as well? And, can we endure whatever measure of misery which befalls or is allowed to us in exchange for that sense of mystery and majesty which renews us day by day such that we do not lose heart? It is this notion of not losing heart which is our focus today. Not only is home where the heart is, as they say, having heart is what sustains us on the journey to our final home.

IX.

When I first considered the notion I found myself exchanging “heart” for “hope.” Upon further reflection, however, I do not think this is helpful or correct. It seems to me that heart is what comes before hope, or what creates hope, or what sustains hope. Curious to see if this was an accurate distinction to make, I did a small bit of research into the word “heart” as found in the Bible.

There are well over a thousand instances of “heart” in the Hebrews scriptures and New Testament. Each one of them is used to denote a person's center for both physical and emotional-intellectual-moral activities. The only exceptions, and there are two, are both found here in 2 Corinthians. The first is in ch. 2 v.4 where Paul explains that he is writing the letter “out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears,” not to grieve the Corinthians but to let them know the depth of his love for them.

X.

The second is in ch. 4 v. 16, which begins our reading for today, where Paul says, “So (in spite of being afflicted in every way, perplexed, persecuted and struck down) we do not lose heart (such that we are not crushed, driven to despair, forsaken, or destroyed.). In each of these two instances, Paul uses the Greek word ἐγκακοῦμεν (enkakoumen) which translates as “we faint not.”

Though it seemed to be particularly the case this past week (hence the urgency) the truth is *every* week I find people who really struggling, really suffering, really grieving, and really just holding on as best they can. If 30 years of ministry has taught me anything is that you can pass 100 people on street and each one of them is struggling, suffering or grieving in some way. If there is an exception to be found, it is simply because they have not yet had their turn; but they most certainly will. Curiously, almost everyone of these

people thinks they are the *only* one, and that they alone are being made to struggle, suffer, or grieve. I am here to tell you, they most certainly are *not*.

XI.

I am also here to tell you, that *you* certainly are not alone in your suffering. Moreover, that you need not suffer alone. While the promise of a building from God eternal in the heavens might be what encourages some to persevere, it is those others who are dwelling in tents right along side you who will sustain you until that promise is fulfilled.

As you go from this place to today, or end the stream, or finish reading these words and go back to your life, take with you the belief that you are not the *only* one. Summon within you a faith that God's love surrounds you, that there are people who stand ready to support you, and that we are, truly, all in this together. Be honest about your needs, ask for help, be *gentle* with yourself, just keep going, and DO NOT lose heart. Amen.