

## 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

### **Grace, Thanksgiving, and Glory**

Context. Without some context this scripture cannot be understood to its fullest extent. This is a reading that comes from a place of suffering, of shattered relationships and trying to find an encouraging word when things are difficult, hard, and complicated. Paul is sharing a word of hope because frankly, life was difficult for him and for those who called themselves followers of Christ. It was difficult politically and socially, and it was difficult personally, for all involved. As with all groups of people whether it be a family, friends, in work, at play, in organizations, and in the church, where people are involved there is going to be conflict. Now conflict is not in itself a terrible thing. Challenges can bring about new ways of understanding life and new ways of doing things. It can open our eyes to possibilities, but it can also sting.

There are also the difficulties in life that have to do with what our bodies do as we age. Earlier in this letter Paul talks about our bodies as jar of clay. Clay pots were strong but could also be broken and shattered. In the scripture we heard Paul compares our bodies to tents. Not surprisingly as Paul was a tentmaker by trade. He understood that tents are subject to wear and tear, to being set up and then taken down, much like our bodies are subject to wear and tear. That wear and tear, that being taken down may come as we age and find that our minds are not as clear as they once were, for some even to the point of dementia. For others it can be mental illness, or hip replacements, cancer that threatens to take us or those we love from living our lives now, and for others it means facing the certainty of death. These things don't care about your age. Challenges in body and mind can come at any age.

We see our world that holds no lack of stories of hunger and desperation. Stories that demonstrate the lack of care for body mind and spirit. Wars and displacement, power and wealth literally and figuratively calling the shots that effects those with the least power and wealth. Life is messy and more than full of examples of how things, people, and relationships, whether between nations or between people are broken.

The Apostle Paul was not stranger to all of this and yet he writes about grace, thanksgiving, and how all of this displays God's glory in the world. It is here that Jesus is the key. I heard it put this way, "God's message of resurrection is a refusal to let human conflict set the terms for the future." Resurrection is by definition a message of hope. And this is not pie in the sky hope, it is a hope born out of the life of Jesus that was itself one of being challenged. Jesus pursued by authorities who ultimately took his life. Jesus' story is one of being with those who knew hunger and pain, death and illness. And yet that is not the end of the story. For our sake Jesus lived and died. It was for the sake of God desiring relationship with each of us that Jesus rose at the power of God's

hand. It was so that we would know that though everything in life seems to decline and decay, those things are not the final word for our lives.

This is true as we live and move and have our being in this life and also in the life to come. It is for these reasons that we talk about responding to the needs of those around us. It is for these reasons that we work to be the people of God who ourselves bring with us God's restoring love and work to the lives of others. And it is for this reason of resurrection, of the power of God over death, not just physical death, but the kinds of dying that takes the fullness of life away from us little by little or by the shovel full each day. It is for these reasons that we get to do what we can to make a difference in the world. For some that doesn't feel like much, but just your thoughts and prayers, make a difference.

I say this knowing that thoughts and prayers are not the only things or even enough for us to do as a church, but for some this is what they can do to hold together the whole. The rest of us take the strength from those prayers to hit the ground with boots on ready to do the work of changing lives with our actions. Which brings me to another point. We do not do this work from a place of knowing all or being fully restored ourselves. This is part of our individual and ongoing work as the body of Christ. God chooses to work through flawed human beings, trusts us enough to love God and others to go about in the world doing things that bring others to wholeness. It is not for us to fix people but to come alongside and be images bearers of God in the world.

The verse that really seems to speak to this is verse 15, "Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God." God has done everything in Christ for our sake so that in this life and in the next we know that God is with us, that God is stronger than human conflict and human suffering. This does not take away our struggle, but in the suffering of Christ we know that God gets it, that God also knows suffering through Christ's body given for us.

And there is the promise that all this suffering does not have the last word. Again, as Paul writes, "...we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup>For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, <sup>18</sup>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."

In no way is human suffering ignored or unimportant in the big scheme of things, but it is also not the end all and be all. Suffering does not have to define us. Through grace, through thanksgiving, and in order that God's purposes and redeeming love may be known, God is glorified when we lean in, trust God to lead us through each challenge, even to the point of death. We are never alone. Now and always, God's presence is with us. So go into the world with the Spirit of God leading you in your every experience and relationship. Go into the world with Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection as

your hope for the yourself and the world. Go into the world trusting that the love and power that raised Christ from the dead still has this power today for us and for the world. Go in peace, go in hope, go in love. Amen.