

June 6, 2021
2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

Pentecost 2
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Don’t Give Up”

“So we do not lose heart ... because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen ...”

“How are you?”

That common greeting has taken on a new meaning in these fifteen months of coping with the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead of the usual replies of “I’m fine” or “life is good,” these three words have become an invitation to share one’s struggles with the challenges and restrictions that have defined our lives for far longer than anyone could have imagined when we first heard about this deadly virus. It has affected people in different ways: some have suffered the economic impact of lost jobs and incomes; other have experienced loneliness and isolation from being separated from friends and family; parents and students have struggled with online learning and trying to keep up with school curricula; and some people are experiencing severe mental health challenges that have been exacerbated by the anxious, fear-filled environment in which all of us have been living. There are times when I am not certain how to respond when someone asks me how I am doing; I am thankful for the home that Susan and I share, for living in a safe neighbourhood that gives us the opportunity to get out for walks and social-distant socializing, but I have also experienced some anxiety and uncertainty over the future of our world, of both my home nation and the nation I call home, and the church that I have been called to serve. The answer to *“how are you”* has become far more complex than it was before we every heard of COVID-19.

One of the ways that people have tried to deal with the challenges and uncertainties of the current pandemic is to look to history and to how people coped with similar situations in the past. A lot of attention has focused on the so-called “Spanish Flu” that broke out at the end of World War I and resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths. While those were very different times, lessons have been taken from that experience, especially in the importance of social distancing and prevented large group gatherings that can become “super spreader” events. Many Lutherans rediscover Martin Luther’s treatise *Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague*, written in 1527 as a deadly plague struck Wittenberg; while many of his colleagues fled the city, Luther chose to stay and counsel others to look to Jesus’ teachings to

“love your neighbour as your yourself” as a guide for how we might serve others in these most difficult times:

- “The service we can render to the needy is indeed such a small thing in comparison with God’s promises and rewards that St. Paul says to Timothy, ‘Godliness is of value in every way, and it holds promise both for the present life and for the life to come.’ [1 Tim. 4:8]. Godliness is nothing else but service to God. Service to God is indeed service to our neighbour. It is proved by experience that those who nurse the sick with love, devotion, and sincerity are generally protected. Though they are poisoned, they are not harmed. As the psalm says, ‘in his illness you heal all his infirmities’ [Psalm 41:3], that is, you change his bed of sickness into a bed of health.”

Another source of guidance and strength are Paul’s words in today’s second lesson from his second letter to the Corinthians, a letter written amid a very painful relationship that Paul is experiencing with the Christians of that Greek city. Paul wrote his first letter to address some issues that were dividing the churches in that city, but word has come back to him that not only are some people resisting his teachings but are actively opposing his apostolic ministry and are even spreading false and malicious rumours about him. The apostle’s pain and disappointment can be heard in this letter, even as he defends his ministry and the gospel he has been called to proclaim:

- “We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God’s word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God ... For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake.” – 4:2, 5.

Paul has suffered greatly for the sake of his witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ; but he continues to remain steadfast in his apostolic ministry in the face of these challenges because of the confidence that comes from this good news of God’s steadfast presence even amid great suffering. Paul’s confidence is grounded in his faith, which contains at its heart the conviction of how the rest of the salvation story is going to play out, *“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.”* (4:14). This encapsulates the heart of the gospel for Paul, providing the basis for his hope and why he does not give up even as he experiences so much affliction and distress. “2

Corinthians 4:13-5:1 calls us to consider how the ultimate end we hope for is also the source of strength and new life in the present.” (Jennifer V. Pietz).

As God’s people have always turned to Scripture as “*a lamp to my feet and a light to my path*” (Psalm 119:105), Paul finds strength in the words of the Hebrew Scriptures, in particular Psalm 116:10: “*I kept my faith, even when I said, ‘I am greatly afflicted.’*” This psalm is a song of thanksgiving in which the psalmists rejoice because their prayer for help have been answered. They can look back on former threats and celebrate God’s goodness and the deliverance God has brought to God’s faithful people:

- “The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold of me; I suffered distress and anguish. Then I called on the name of the LORD: ‘O LORD, I pray, save my life!’ Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; our God is merciful. The LORD protects the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me. Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.” – 116:3-7.

In looking back over their experience, the psalmists recall the severity of the affliction. But their words are not indicative of resignation or despair; they do not see themselves as the victims of deceit, nor do they place their hope in human help, but will continue to “*offer you a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the LORD.*” (116:17).

- “Unless God comes to one’s assistance, the one who is truthful by confession quickly becomes a liar in suffering by the denial of the faith, as if to say: ‘This cup teaches that unless a person on the Lord, relies on the Lord, he himself will in no wise stand, because he is a man and will fail.’ Therefore it is the Lord who helps in consternation and in persecution, not man.” – Martin Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms*.

The “*same spirit of faith*” that is expressed in these faithful ancestors who found strength amid suffering in God’s steadfast presence is the source of Paul’s confidence in sharing the gospel even as he suffers for the sake of his faithful witness. This faith “*that we know through Jesus Christ and in which we participate through the Holy Spirit is a faith not found in ourselves, or through our own effort. It is a faith outside of us, a faith that the Holy Spirit awakens, nourishes, and strengthens within us.*” (Dirk Lange). Because Christ was raised from the dead, believers who are one with Christ and who have died with Christ and shared his sufferings already have newness

of life and are assured that, in the end times, they will have a resurrection like his, a message Paul shares throughout his letters:

- “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” – Romans 6:3-5.
- “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” – Philippians 3:10-11.

Christ has died and been raised; believers currently share his death and confidently expect to share his resurrection at the end time, the *Parousia*. At the centre of this gospel is Paul’s affirmation of God’s grace, by which he means God’s freely given, unmerited gift of new life in Christ: “*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.*” (4:15). Grace, when it transforms a life, generates glorification of God. Glorification of God is the fruit of grace at work. The goal of human life, transformed by God’s grace, is to glorify God (“... *so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*” – Romans 15:6) and to give thanks to God (“*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*” – 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

- “Thanksgiving, if there is to be any at all, must begin and end with God ... We are thankful not only for God’s constancy and for our place in his plan, but, if we are truly to be a part of the process of redeeming the familiar, we are most thankful that with God we are given a second chance.” – Peter Gomes.

Because of God’s grace and the hope founded upon it, Paul boldly proclaims “*so we do not lose heart*” (4:16). He previously stated that “*since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart [enkakeo, “despair, become weary”]*” (4:1), and goes on to declare that “*even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.*” Paul has the abiding conviction that afflictions are a part of the life of faith; they are signposts that one is proceeding as should be expected (“*In fact, when we were with you, we told you*

beforehand that we were to suffer persecutions; so it turned out, as you know.” – 1 Thessalonians 3:4). Persecution and suffering are not signs of failure; they demonstrate that Paul’s ministry on behalf of the gospel – and indeed all Christian life – involves continual death and resurrection in conformity with the crucified and risen Christ. *“Resurrection life is apparent not only in the absence of suffering or strife, but also – and even especially – in the midst of these, as God’s Spirit is present and working to bring new life in ways often unseen.”* (Pietz). Paul can speak of the suffering that he and other faithful Christians endure as a *“slight momentary affliction”* not because the persecution is not real and often severe, but because it 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”* (4:17-18). Not only are appearances misleading, but they are also temporary. They last only for a time, whereas the unseen things are eternal, because they are rooted in the eternal love of God that abides with us always through our Lord Jesus Christ:

- “By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith – being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.” – 1 Peter 1:3-7.

When Paul introduces a statement with *“we know”* (*oidamen*), he is drawing on material he assumes his readers know and embrace; here it is in the declaration 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”* (5:1). Paul contrasts the earthly, temporal tent (*skenos*) that defines our current life with an eternal, heavenly edifice (*oikodome*) which is from God, not made with human hands. Christian faith is rooted in the hope of the resurrection, that our Lord has prepared for us a place in which we will dwell in the presence of God with all the faithful departed who now dwell in the house of the Lord, the place where God abides amid God’s holy people, that place where everything that caused us suffering and pain will be no more:

- “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God

himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” – Revelation 21:3-4.

Our hope is rooted in the sure and certain knowledge that nothing can separate us from the love of God which is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord. This hope for the future is also the source of our strength for today; because we know that God is with us always as *“our help in ages past, our hope for years to come; our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home”* (ELW Hymn 632), we have a source of strength and hope that will give us the courage to live through even the most uncertain and difficult of times in the comfort of God’s holy and certain hope, knowing that *“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear”* (Psalm 46:1-2). As God’s people endured suffering and uncertainty knowing that *“suffering itself is not redemptive, but it is an inevitable part of living and preaching the gospel of life and truth in a world where the powers of death and deception still attack, until the fullness of God’s purposes is realized”* (Pietz), we can find strength to persevere in the challenges we encounter in this age of pandemic knowing that no matter how arduous our circumstances may become, we have the confident faith that *“the LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore”* (Psalm 121:7-8).

- “Fear is mastered through love. The New Testament affirms, ‘There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear.’ The king of love which led Christ to the cross and kept Paul unembittered amid the angry torrents of persecution is not the soft, anemic, and sentimental. Such love confronts evil without flinching and shows in our popular parlance an infinite capacity ‘to take it.’ Such love overcomes the world even form a rough-hewn cross against the skyline.” – Martin Luther King, Jr.

The question “how are you?” may forever be changed by the experience of this pandemic. Far more than a mere habitual greeting, it may become an expression of genuine concern for the health and welfare of the person we meet. Sharing the experience of this traumatic chapter of human history may create a more caring and nurturing environment that seeks to uphold and support one another through whatever challenges and trials we may face long after we come out of this time of separation and restriction. The question may become one that lets the other know that we are present for them and seek to share in both the experience of life’s challenges and suffering as well as the confidence faith that give us the courage to not lose hope

because we live in the presence of the “*steadfast love of the Lord [that] never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*” (Lamentations 3:22-23). “How are you” may become an expression of genuine love and concern as well as a witness to God’s steadfast love for all people in all circumstances:

- “This is why those who are gathered together in community are witnesses to the compassionate Lord. By the way they are able to carry each other’s burdens and share each other’s joys, they testify to God’s presence in our world.” – Henri Nouwen.

Our faith in the steadfast love of God present with us through our Lord Jesus Christ is the source of trust and confidence that gives us the ability to not give up, to not lose heart, to not become discouraged even in the most difficult times and challenging circumstances, because we know that we are God’s holy people, that “*neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord his children sever,*” and that “*the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Saviour Jesus Christ, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good that you may do God’s will, working in you that which is well-pleasing in God’s sight; through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever.*” (Benediction, ELW Funeral Service).

Amen.