



*Lewistown - Trinity United Methodist Church*  
*P.O. Box 134, 8088 CR 54*  
*Lewistown, OH 43333*  
*937-686-8355; [www.LTUMC.com](http://www.LTUMC.com)*  
*Rev. Debra Ketcham – 614-580-2382 (Cell)*

Greetings in the name of the Lord!

Our scriptures are from Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 and Romans 8:26-39.

It is easy to love and trust God when things are going well, but when life gets really tough, in the mist of excruciating pain, or circumstances beyond our control, do we trust – do we trust that God is with us to strengthen and carry us? Do we believe, no matter what, God is always with us?

Many years ago, God told me in prayer, if I didn't get my spiritual and healthy disciplines fully ingrained in my life, I would crash and burn and my ministry with me. Things were going very well at church, so I knew it was for some time the future. I assumed God would give me plenty of time to do this, but discovered I would be strongly tested a year and a half later.

Rough and tough, doesn't adequately explain the reality I found myself in. When I started feeling the stress, I was glad I was used to reading the Bible, studying, reflecting and praying each day. Together they kept me centered and focused on what God wanted. I decided though I better get to exercising, just in case this was the difficult time God had foretold.

As time went on, I felt a whole lot like Jesus during the last days of Holy Week. I felt and understood the laments and heartaches found in Psalms, in a much deeper way. I discovered the words Jeremiah cried out in his anguish, weren't sufficient. My best friends in ministry were up to their ears in family or church crisis, and Dan, although he would listen to my frustration and pain, was only able to join me on weekends.

I praise God that I did not give up on my call or doubt God's love. If it wasn't for the prayers of many people, if it wasn't for the people in church who sent me notes of encouragement, if I hadn't trusted God, when everything seemed to be crumbling around me, if God hadn't given me a hard-headed resolve to do what God wanted - no matter what - I would have faltered. - If it wasn't for the spiritual disciplines and the healthy lifestyle God told me to get ingrained, I would have crashed and burned, and my ministry too.

The most amazing thing through that anguished, distressing time was - I did not get sick. Usually people get sick under great duress. I had heard of pastors in our conference, even had

close friends who suffered greatly at their jobs, who ended up with cancer or 'stress disorders'. Sure, there were times I resorted to self-pity and felt sorry for myself. Sure, I got discouraged. At one point, I wasn't sure who to go to for help.

At that point when I was mentally and spiritually exhausted, I asked the Holy Spirit to pray on my behalf, since I had no words left to pray. I would sit there, day after day, with my head down, my hands folded in silence, trusting the Holy Spirit to pray on my behalf. God placed on my heart to talk to the priest in town, but I didn't. A few months later, I found out why I should have, as he had gone through the same thing, got healing, and returned to fight against the spiritual warfare going on in his church.

Millions of Christians, throughout history, had endured grave hardships, - most much worse than mine. In our scripture today, Paul knows the Christians in Rome were enduring unbelievable persecution. Although he doesn't go into great detail, we can look at what Christians endured by looking at 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, chapter 6, verses 4-10, "As servants of God, we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger.

In chapter 11 Paul encouraged the Christians in Corinth to, "Put up with anyone who enslaves you, or exploits you, or takes advantage of you, or pushes himself forward, or slaps you in the face." He continued, "I have been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received 40 lashes, minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked. I spent a night and a day in the open sea. I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea, and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked." And he goes on. The Christians in Rome were enduring similar sufferings.

Thankfully we haven't had to undergo those levels of pain and suffering for our faith, but Christians in other parts of the world have, as they stood up for their faith. Bishop Coyner, while Bishop of the Dakotas Conferences wrote, "One of the things that impressed me during my visit to Lithuania is the way many of the United Methodists have had to stand up for their faith against very difficult situations. Let me share with you two stories.

"One of the interpreters who helped me was a young woman, who shared with me how difficult things were for Christians during the Soviet occupation when Lithuania was part of the USSR. She said that children like her were challenged in school by teachers, who made

everyone stand up who was a Christian, and then the teachers would ridicule those children. She was one of those children who year after year remained firm in her faith.

“Another man, who served as our driver, had been an officer in the Lithuanian army. When he was asked by the Russians to join the KGB, the secret police, he refused. For the next 5 years the KGB followed him everywhere to see what he might be doing wrong, and tried to pressure him into joining them. Can you imagine being followed and scrutinized for 5 years, each and every day? Would you continue to stand up for your faith and convictions against such pressure?

“Today”, the bishop wrote, “things are better in Lithuania, and many of their freedoms have been restored. Yet our United Methodist brothers and sisters still face harassment by other ‘state sponsored’ denominations. United Methodists are accused of being a ‘sect’, and not a real church. United Methodists are accused of trying to steal children because they are involved in social outreach projects to help children. Rumors were spread that United Methodists all had AIDS. Of course our missionaries in Lithuania try to help the UM people respond to such false allegations and pressures, but it is not easy being a United Methodist in a land which has had so much oppression in the past, and still suffers from discrimination against the ‘free churches’ which are not state supported or approved.

“It makes me thankful,” Bishop Coyner wrote, “to live in a place where we can be active and public with our Christian faith, and to live in an area where ‘church people’ are typically respected, and to live in a place where we may have denominational differences but we don’t find outright hostility from other Christians. It makes me sad that my brothers and sisters in Lithuania have gone through so much oppression. It makes me proud of their courage and their faith.”

Our scripture says, since God is with us, no one greater can ever be against us, meaning no matter what happens, we are never alone and God will work in and through the situation. When circumstances seem unbearable, God will use those circumstances to chisel away what needs to be released, like a sculpture chisels away pieces of stone. God chisel’s away our pride, deceit, jealousy, anger, shame, and whatever separates us from God and others.

Many of our brothers and sisters in faith have endured scalding, broken bones, loss of income, mutilations, and even death for their belief in Jesus Christ in areas of Africa, Asia, and South America. Whatever our difficulties have been so far, ours are mere inconveniences in comparison. Yet Paul reminds Christians of all times and places, no matter your circumstance, God’s love will reach deep down into the depths of your despair. God’s love reaches down in

the midst of your trials and tribulations. God's love outlasts and defeats every enemy - even death itself.

Christian assurance is the result of a trusting faith. Those who follow Christ, even into the valley of the shadow of death, will find they have nothing to fear, not even death. No circumstance or suffering has the power to break apart the love God has for those in Christ. Many have tried to create doubt in the mind of a Christian believer, but Paul declares all enemies are beaten by God.

In one of the most recognized verses read at funerals, Paul states he is convinced that absolutely nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Death is not permanent for those who believe. Death is the beginning of a new phase of life with God. God's love is the unshakable assurance that nothing, can ever come between us and God's love for us, revealed in Jesus Christ. We are loved no matter what we have done. We are still loved when we turn away from God, just as you would love a family member who has run amuck. In the midst of heartache and pain, God's love is actively working in and through us, especially when we do not understand why we have to suffer.

You may be wondering the outcome of that wilderness period I went through. When I thought I was in the midst of the worst of times, Bishop Ough lifted me up in praise in front of the Lay Ministry Academy we were both teaching one day. Later he told me not to worry. My District Superintendent, after not giving me any support finally said, "You did what we wanted you to do. You stood strong, no matter what." It would have been nice to know that earlier.

Paul wrote in chapter 5 of Romans, "Rejoice in your suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character. Character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts."

So when you feel so downtrodden that you can't see when it will ever end; when you feel defeated, oppressed, and broken down; when everything seems to crumble before your very eyes, and you aren't sure you have any words for prayer, don't give up. God's love and presence is there. Brothers and sisters in Christ are praying on your behalf. If you believe in Christ and follow him - you will not be forsaken.

Paul, assured of God's unshakable and sovereign love, wrote "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither dark angels or demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." May you be assured of God's unbreakable bond with us too.

*Blessings! Pastor Debbie*