

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

Last week we heard that a lot of Americans believe they are going to heaven simply because they are good. Not because of Jesus, not because of the grace of God, but because of who they are and what they have or have not done. It's true, isn't it, that we like to determine our own reality? We like to decide the way things are, don't we? But the problem is, we mess up, a lot.

Twentieth century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein explains why it is so dangerous for us when we try to define our reality: "Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving oneself." That sentence has a double negative.... In other words, it is hard for us to see the truths about ourselves, and easy to believe what we want to believe about ourselves and our surroundings. We perceive things through our own lens, and we may be mistaken about what is really happening. The problem with believing our own perception of life is that we fail to meet God on God's terms, we fail to follow God's commands. According to theologian Philip Watson, we "don't let God be God".

In the gospel lesson from Mark today, we heard how some of the people surrounding Jesus and the Pharisees were convinced that Jesus received his power from demons. Even his family thought he was crazy. The Pharisees, some of the people following Jesus, and Jesus' family all created their own reality to define God to fit their own perceptions. Jesus turned things around, saying that his family is whoever follows God. Yes, Jesus defined reality on his own terms, but his terms were founded on the perfection of the triune God. Jesus defined his family as whoever does the will of God.

We all have our own ideas about what God is all about, and what our lives are all about, and then, God comes and confuses all those plans and ideas. I once attended a conference where a woman on the elevator said, "Do you want to see God laugh? Tell God your plans for the day." Sometimes God's plans are just the opposite of what we expect. When we ask God to bless our plans, when we don't consult with God and listen to where God wants us to go, what God wants us to do, we grow away from God, and often times our plans don't turn out the way we expected.

In last week's lesson from 2Corinthians we heard Paul say we have a treasure in clay jars so that the glory of God takes precedence, it isn't our power but God's power that shines. Paul spoke about the hidden character of the gospel and how the followers of Christ have endured hardship. How many of us would rather have a more tranquil life than the one we are living, a life with less sorrow and difficulty? Thinking back to last week again, Paul said we might be crushed, but we are not destroyed. Why? Because of the grace of God. God's reality is just the opposite of how it seems to be; we may feel as though we are forsaken, but we are not destroyed. God's grace creates a new, a better reality for us.

Paul goes on in today's lesson from 2Corinthians to tell us that our reality is based on the resurrection of Christ. It is only through the lens of the resurrection that we can see clearly what reality is like. Read that sentence again. What is this reality like? Paul tells us, like Christ, we will be raised. Is this just a future hope? Not according to Paul. Paul said that the anxieties and suffering he endured and survived are like little deaths and resurrections, and his suffering helped the church grow. More often than not, when we go through suffering we grow personally. We can also direct that personal growth toward our church and help it to grow in community by sharing our experiences with

others who are facing the same difficulties, to help them understand what they are going through.

When we see our problems as little deaths from which we will rise, we can have a different perspective, and then the problems do not seem as hard to endure. From the perspective of Jesus' resurrection, life is not what it seems. Paul speaks of our outer nature wasting away and our inner nature being renewed. Our outer nature, (that which does not belong to Christ), is fading away as our inner being, (that which does belong to Christ), is becoming renewed. It's kind of like peeling away the outer layers of an onion. The layers on the outside are dried out and are not suitable to be used, they need to be peeled away so the inner layers, the juicer ones, the ones that are usable, are exposed. The outer layers are tossed away. That's what happens to the life that is separated from God. It is tossed away so that which is closer to Christ can be revealed. The resurrection gives us a new perspective because it puts to death that in us which resists seeing things God's way. We can be grateful that the outer, layer, that which is closest to the world but furthest from God, is able to be discarded.

When you live with a confidence that things are right between you and God, you are on the way to where Jesus was on the first Easter. When you see the difficulties of this mortal life as transient, something that will pass away, then the difficulties are easier to get through. They are little deaths that don't have the final word. Life looks a lot better from this point of view. Even death itself doesn't look so bad because you have been dying and suffering like Christ your whole life. Just like death didn't have the final word with Jesus on the first Easter, it is not going to have the final word for you either.

Martin Luther wrote, "...wherever the Holy Spirit is present the Spirit effects a new heart and mind in one who no longer flees from God but, though he knows and acknowledges that he has sinned and merited God's wrath, still takes comfort from the grace of Christ." Even when our actions, because of our sin nature, lead us away from God, when we realize what we have in the grace of God through Christ, we are given a desire to build up our inner nature and to do God's will.

There is something in us, perhaps it is original sin, which resists belonging to God, which wants to define reality on our own terms. But then Paul comes and tells us about the resurrection. And when we believe what Paul says about resurrection, suddenly our lives are a lot richer, they are not the hopeless tragedy they seemed to be. God doesn't allow the difficulties we face in this life to win. It's good that God doesn't let things stay the way they seem.

All glory be to God.