

FIRST LESSON: Psalm 116: 8-9; 14-19
SECOND LESSON: 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1
June 6, 2021

“A Matter of Life and Death”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

The story goes that a tough old cowboy from Texas counseled his granddaughter that if she wanted to live a long and healthy life, the secret was to sprinkle a pinch of gun powder on her oatmeal every morning. The granddaughter did this religiously until the age of 103, when she died. She left behind 14 children, 30 grandchildren, 45 great-grandchildren, 25 great-great-grandchildren, and a 40-foot hole where the crematorium used to be.

The apostle Paul did not have what we would call an easy life. Later in this letter he mentions things like being whipped, stoned, beaten, imprisoned, and shipwrecked. He talks about working long and hard hours, spending sleepless nights, often being in danger, hungry, cold and naked. And in addition to all of this Paul had acquired some form of physical illness he referred to as “a thorn in the flesh.” Most people in Paul’s situation would have given up. This man did not give up. And on top of the physical trials, Paul had opponents. He had founded the church in Corinth, but after he left others came in, men who claimed that Paul was not a legitimate leader. So Paul had to try to defend himself for the sake of the church. And in so doing he quoted parts of Psalm 116 that we read this morning. He was confident in the grace of God to overcome all obstacles. Anything, even suffering, could be turned into good. Despite everything that was going on Paul concludes, “Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

Regardless of how tough things were Paul’s faith made it possible for him to keep putting one foot in front of another. And things were pretty bad. The language in the original Greek is much more toxic than the English translation. Our translation is almost poetic, saying, “though outwardly we are wasting away.” It doesn’t sound *that* bad. It sounds like losing a dangerous amount of weight. But the word means decay. And this is a strong “I can practically smell it from” word for decay. It is **thoroughly** rotten, putrid even. Whatever we are talking about is a maggot filled pile of slime. It is intensely, completely and utterly decayed. By anyone’s standards this is a condition to be avoided. The circumstances of Paul’s life and health are THAT bad. And that is REALLY bad! We might say someone has rotten luck but this is rotten luck on steroids. But the contrast to this is his inward life—a life that is blossoming and healthy.

To describe the inward life it is possible that Paul invented a word. We can't find it anywhere outside of here and one other Pauline letter. Greek might have had a word to describe the absolute pits, but it did not have a word strong enough to counter it. So Paul put "up" and "renew" together to make a new more intensive form of renewal. As bad as this state of decay was, this was the direct opposite. It is to cause to grow and become new, to gain strength, energy and vitality.

Our inner person is renewed day by day when we walk in faith. Our struggles can actually help us to grow spiritually. Even though we all want life to be easy, we don't become strong when life is easy. We become strong when life is tough. Spiritual muscles are like physical ones. Sitting on the couch eating popcorn does not improve our overall health! Getting out and doing hard physical work does. And when we go through tough times and rely on God we grow in faith. We no longer have to wonder if God is faithful. We know God is faithful. Paul was so confident of this he jokingly referred to the catastrophic trials he has been through as "light and momentary troubles." Paul compared his trials as "light" next to the "eternal glory that far outweighs them all." It's all relative.

We kind of know what this is like on a human level. I was talking with someone recently about some struggles I was going through which seemed very heavy to her, but which I was carrying much lighter. When I shared some of what I have been through in my life, she agreed. Compared to THAT, THIS is nothing! Paul's comparison is not between bad and bad, but between horrendous and amazingly good. And the amazingly good makes the horrendous look like nothing. In addition to all this, our struggles are temporal. They happen in time. There is a limit to them. But the glory is eternal. There are no limits to it. As a result, "we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

Paul then moves on to describing our body as "an earthly house", but he says that this house is basically a tent. This is not an image I'm used to, but it would not have been that foreign to the Jews in Paul's audience. In the Old Testament before the Temple was built the Ark of the Covenant dwelt in a tent, but the tent was clearly a temporary home. And while there are still nomadic peoples in the world whose permanent homes are tents, most of us do not live long term in tents. Those who are refugees or homeless who live in tents don't want to live in tents. We may go camping but we don't do it forever. The comedian Jim Gaffigan hates camping. His wife told him camping was a tradition in her family. He told her it was a tradition in everyone's family before the invention of the house.

Our bodies are like tents in that they are temporary. They are designed to shelter us for a time, but not forever. Eventually there will be wear and tear. Eventually the tent starts to fray and disintegrate. And while we can take very good care of our tent and ensure that it has a long lifespan, no tent lasts forever. We fear death because we fear being cast out of our "tent." But the transition of death is not into homelessness. It is a transition into a new and permanent home, one that will last.

So much of the quality of our lives is based on what we focus our attention on. Two people can face identical circumstances, and one be joyful

and the other miserable. Paul chose not to pour all his energy into the misery in his life, even though he described it in the worst possible terms. Instead he said, “we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” Whatever we are experiencing—good or bad—it is transitory. Even the worst of times will not last forever. But Paul had an unwavering vision of eternity with God. It may be because he had a unique spiritual experience. Later in chapter 12 Paul refers to visions and revelations, and speaks about “a man who was caught up to paradise” who heard and saw inexpressible things.” Despite the fact that he describes this man in the third person he was almost certainly talking about himself. Most of us have not had this type of experience, but Paul’s testimony can give us hope. We all want to live. We all do our best to stay healthy and strong as long as possible, hopefully not with the help of gunpowder. But if we trust in Jesus there is no need to fear. When our tent wears out, a new home awaits. Amen.

Psalm 116: 8-9; 14-19

- ⁸ For you, Lord, have delivered me from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling,
⁹ that I may walk before the Lord
in the land of the living.
¹⁴ I will fulfill my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people.
¹⁵ Precious in the sight of the Lord
is the death of his faithful servants.
¹⁶ Truly I am your servant, Lord;
I serve you just as my mother did;
you have freed me from my chains.
¹⁷ I will sacrifice a thank offering to you
and call on the name of the Lord.
¹⁸ I will fulfill my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people,
¹⁹ in the courts of the house of the Lord—
in your midst, Jerusalem.

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

- ¹³ It is written: “I believed; therefore I have spoken.” Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak, ¹⁴ because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. ¹⁵ All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God. ¹⁶ Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far

outweighs them all. ¹⁸ So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

5 For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.