

*Based on 2 Corinthians 6:4-10. Virtue Through Suffering*

Our Lesson today brings us to the most theologically fruitful time of life for the Apostle Paul, with wisdom gleaned from many years of devotion to ministry with all too human congregations served by an all too human apostle (meaning himself).

By the time of this Second Letter to the congregation in Corinth, Paul has journeyed well beyond the initial blinding light mountaintop moment on the road to Damascus that led him to join the Jesus Movement. Paul has labored years to establish congregations in Greece and modern day Turkey, bringing many new people into the movement. Through it all, Paul has believed in his soul that the realm of God - The Next Life, as Steve Charleston calls it, with its endless tomorrows and its beautiful landscape - is but moments away.

In the meantime, however, Paul is coming to admit, as we prepare for this *new way of being alive*, he says, we have to figure out how to live - faithfully and with hope - in the world *as it is*, with all of its suffering and all of its enduring grace, *aware* of the worst that is among us and yet *transformed* through a *process of transcendence* that makes the realm of God real in this moment, even as we wait for it to come in its fullness.

That is the big conundrum for us, is it not? At least it is for me. How do we celebrate and enjoy the world as it is, even as we work for and prepare for *an existence beyond the one we inhabit*? On the one hand, we gape in awe for the beauty of the earth and the place of humanity within this good creation. On the other hand, we gasp in horror at the deaths in Mecca that can only be attributed to human caused climate change. On the one hand, we celebrate the healing and wholeness and hope that comes when an addict finds recovery. On the other hand, we weep and mourn and gnash our teeth when yet another overdose leads to yet another death.

What can this Sacred Spirit Paul writes of be up to, we might wonder?

And what is our place within it?

The simple answer, according to Paul - although *simple* in this sense does not mean *easy* - is virtue formation through adversity. To put it bluntly, Paul is saying, when the challenges of hardship inevitably come upon us, we must use them to become better people.

When our collective politics becomes one Great Big Lie, Paul tells us, we must learn more deeply how to tell the truth. When everything we are and everything we care about is dismissed as ignorant or unimportant, Paul tells us, we must learn more deeply how to stand our ground with love. When we lose everything we thought had any meaning in our lives, Paul tells us, we must learn more deeply the most important thing: *God loves us, and so does this church.*

This is not to say Paul is telling us to seek out suffering or that God is somehow causing us to suffer in order to make us stronger. It is simply to say, as Paul discovers, that there is within us and among us and through us an Enduring Grace that holds us and guides us *no matter what.*

That grace cannot really be taught, I have found. It sure cannot be bought. What the Apostle Paul has to learn for himself - and you and I for ourselves as well - is that grace must be *experienced*, one day at a time, one moment at a time, even - and perhaps especially - in the midst of the suffering, as we *wait and listen for the sound of the genuine within ourselves*. Howard Thurman tells us this *sound of the genuine* will guide us AWAY from *the ends of strings that somebody else pulls*. Therefore, as Paul is trying to tell us, the best approach to our suffering is to tie ourselves even more tightly to the strings of the sacred spirit that pull us ever to enduring grace.

As the world around us gets worse, Paul says, our call is to get better. To seek *first* the realm of God and all that is good and right within it. To insist upon a table spread for every mouth to be fed even in the midst of so much hunger. To sing of a dawn drawing near that will wipe away our tears even in the midst of so much sadness. To hold fast to mercy, justice and a peace that passes all understanding, even when - especially when - those graces seem so far removed from our reality.

It turns out, according to Paul, that living faithfully and with hope - in the world *as it is*, while preparing for the world to be a *better place* means something like becoming ambassadors of the enduring grace for which the world is so desperate. Paul might even say we are being transformed into *Angels* of that Enduring Grace.

Our job, Paul tells us, as we strive to live faithfully and with hope in the world as it is, becomes shouting out with joy, even in the midst of the suffering all around, that *the life of the world to come* really is just around the corner, that the world as we know it, in all of its suffering, really is *about to turn*.