

7.26.20
First UCC Northfield
Sermon Series on 2 Corinthians (NL)
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2 Corinthians 5:1-21 For we know 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. For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling— if indeed, when we have taken it off we will not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord— for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil. Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others; but we ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences. We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart. For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Sermon

Thank you, Sarah, for reading! That was a lot to take in. I must tell you that after sitting with this text for the past couple of weeks, I'm still not sure what to make of it. There is a lot in there. Paul gives us much to think about. Lots of metaphor, and some great one-liners, which include, "we are ambassadors for Christ," and "if anyone is in Christ, they are new creation." (Fun side note, the scripture has been translated to read a new creation, but the Greek communicates that anyone who is in Christ is constantly newly being created, as in, ongoing creation, and I really like that! But we're not talking about that today.)

Paul gives us metaphors of tents, houses, clothing and more. He continues with the theme he initiated earlier in the letter, talking about reconciliation. You may remember, he's not in a good place with the Corinthians. Besides an awkward and painful last visit to this congregation he started, he's decided not to visit them again. And yet in the midst of conflict, he's using all of these metaphors to try to say that what is really important is the stuff in life that we can't see. Things like love, kindness, forgiveness, patience and more. To give the

Corinthians and perhaps himself a word of hope, Paul writes, “we walk by faith and not by sight.”

You see, alongside this conflict with the Corinthians, life for Paul and others wasn’t easy. It was short, there were no guarantees, and in his life as a follower of Christ, Paul was no stranger to pain, suffering, prison, and ultimately, death. So when he says those great one liners—“we are being newly created,” “we are ambassadors,”—he’s not naïve. He’s not just sharing niceties. It takes a lot for someone to look around at the painful realities in the world and say, “ah yes, I know this is our reality. This is what we see, *and* it’s not the whole of what’s going on here.” Paul is saying, as a person who knows pain first hand, that though *everything* the eye can see looks to be to the contrary, God is on the move. God is up to nothing less than making things right in the world.

And why is Paul writing this? “So what?” we might ask. Well, Paul says it himself: so that they don’t lose heart. So that *we* don’t lose heart. In the midst of a life that is completely uncertain, Paul says, we must trust, *know*—amidst all that we *don’t know*—that God is working to make good, even when we can’t see it. *So* that we don’t lose heart. *So* that we keep hope alive.

Paul’s not giving them false hope, which says, “I am certain that things will get better. That everything will be fine. There is nothing to worry about. Just keep doing what you are doing.” Nor is he saying to give up on hope, to lose heart, which would say, “things aren’t going to get better. Everything is hopeless, so don’t even try to change anything. Just keep doing what you’re doing.” Paul isn’t giving them false hope that things will be fine, nor is he telling them to give up because nothing’s going to change anyway. Paul is dwelling in the in-between. In the uncertainty, encouraging them to trust, and to not live their lives by the terrible things that surround them. To keep striving. “Christ urges us on,” Paul writes, trusting that God is there too working within us and outside of us for good. We must live, trusting this, having faith in this, Paul says, so that we don’t lose heart.

So then, what is faith, if we’re supposed to live by faith and not by sight? There are plenty of people who have written on this over the past 2,000 years. I encourage you to read up if you like! In this case, I think of faith as a mix of trust and hope, with a lot of God’s help added in. It’s a lot easier to *know things* than to do the hard work of trusting. Trust is partly just in the doing of it of letting go, or holding things loosely, but I think it also requires God’s help. Hope is another thing altogether. And I want to talk about that for a moment.

Rebecca Solnit is a long-time activist, and the author of the book *Hope in the Dark*. She says that hope—real hope—is uncertainty. Solnit writes that we can’t be certain everything will get better, because, well, look around. But we also can’t be certain that nothing will get better, either. Real hope, Solnit says, is being willing to live in uncertainty, because “hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable.”¹ To be certain that everything will get better doesn’t require hope. And to be certain that nothing will get better doesn’t allow for hope either. But to be *uncertain*, to be uncertain is to be in a hopeful place. Because to be in uncertainty is to also be in possibility.

“Hope,” Solnit says, “means another world just might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed.”² But still possible. She says that “Hope locates itself in the premise that we don’t

¹ Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*, 4.

² *Ibid.*, xiv.

know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty [there] is room to act.”³ To do something that might have an impact on the unknown future for the better. So in to dwell in possibility, to have hope, to be able to change the world for the better, we must also live in uncertainty. Uncertainty is where Paul is dwelling too. Not denying the pain and sadness of the world, but not thinking that’s all there is, either.

We hear Paul naming the truth of the world. Of suffering and pain. “We groan,” he writes, under the weight of it. There is plenty of uncertainty going around. But there is also reason to hope. Because what if that groaning, with God’s midwifery, were bringing about something new, something good waiting to be born. As Paul would say, “we walk by faith, not by sight” and we are called to help buoy one another in that. We hope, we trust, we pray and act for what we do not yet see, living in uncertain times, because within what is uncertain is what is *possible*. What could be. A new way of being. A new life. A new world. A new way.

Let us live into those possibilities, lifting one another up, doing what we can, trusting that God walks with us. And we will not lose heart. Amen.

Benediction

As you go from here, remember this: the same Spirit of God who lived in and raised Jesus also lives in you, breathing new life and freedom into your hearts and minds. So go from here with joy and confidence, knowing that God is at work within you. Amen.

³ Ibid.