

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta

“The Action of God’s Love” (2 Corinthians 4:14-5:1)

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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Apostle Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians is far and away his most vulnerable letter. He does not water down the realities of his suffering as an apostle of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ—as he writes:

Five times I have received the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? (2 Corinthians 11:24-29).

Not only did Paul suffer all these things in his apostolic ministry, he also suffered in his personal life, especially with what he dubbed his “thorn in the flesh”:
“Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.” Paul does not reveal what this specific “thorn in the flesh” was, though there are many theories about it, but he does reveal what he did about it: “Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness’” (2 Corinthians 12:7-9).

Along these lines, let me ask you some very nosy (but rhetorical) questions today...how have you suffered in your life? When have you been shipwrecked and adrift at sea? What dangers have you had to navigate? What are the things in your life that have caused you “many a sleepless night”? What daily pressures cause the most anxiety for you? Or to get even more personal...what is the thorn in your flesh, that thing that you have appealed to the Lord to take away but it’s still there?

I do not need you to tell me the answers to all these nosy questions—you already know—and more importantly, so does the Lord. And I believe Jesus offers you the same reassurance he offered Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” This is exactly where today’s beautiful passage from Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians meets you, a passage replete with hope especially when you suffer, even if that suffering is terminal:

We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God (2 Corinthians 4:14-15).

In other words, God’s grace is stronger than death and God’s grace never ends, but rather “extends to more and more people”, including you. Paul then continues:

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal (2 Corinthians 4:16-5:1).

Realizing your “outer nature is wasting away” is sobering (or if you are in serious denial it is sobering to see how everyone else’s outer nature is wasting away). Paul Simon put it this way in his 1990 song “The Obvious Child”:

Sonny sits by his window and thinks to himself
How it’s strange that some rooms are like cages
Sonny’s yearbook from high school is down from the shelf
And he idly thumbs through the pages
Some have died
Some have fled from themselves
Or struggled from here to get there
Sonny wanders beyond his interior walls
Runs his hand through his thinning brown hair
(On his album *The Rhythm of the Saints*)

Like Sonny, if you flip through your high school yearbook you too may see that “some have died, some have fled from themselves, or struggled from here to get there.” Perhaps some of them peaked in high school—maybe you peaked in high school, though if so that does not impact God’s love for you one iota. Either way there is no escaping the reality that our “outer nature is wasting away.”

In his moving 1995 novel *Beach Music* the late South Carolinian author Pat Conroy recounts a conversation Jack McCall has with his mother Lucy, whose “outer nature is wasting away” due to cancer. Jack is a single father who adores his daughter Leah and has taken the lead among his brothers to care for their dying mother, caring for her in gritty ways no one else is willing to do. At the side of his mother’s deathbed Jack, as vulnerably as the Apostle Paul, reveals his struggles about the most important thing in the world:

Everyone talks about love all the time. It’s like the weather. But how does a man like me learn to do it? How do I unlock those pipes and jets where it lies in the deepest part of me? If I knew how to do it, Mom, I’d let everybody have their fair share. I’d spread it around and I wouldn’t skimp for anyone. But no one taught me the steps to that dance (738).

Although Lucy’s “outer nature is wasting away” her inner nature is “being renewed day by day”—and she understands where Jack is going with this:

“You want to teach Leah about love?” Lucy whispered. “Is that it?” “Yes—and I can’t. I don’t have a clue.” “You don’t need words, son. You’ve got all the equipment. Tell her love is cleaning vomit off your mother’s gown and bed, cleaning diarrhea from a hospital floor. Flying five thousand miles when you hear your mother’s sick. Tell her love is finding a very sick brother on the Edisto River and bringing him back without hurting him; bringing a drunk father home a hundred times during your teen years. Tell Leah it’s raising a little girl alone. Love’s action, Jack” (739).

Lucy McCall is right, “Love’s action.” And it is the action of God’s love in Jesus Christ that gives hope even as your “outer nature is wasting away” and it is the action of God’s love in Jesus Christ that enables your inner nature to be “renewed day by day.”

The action of God's love is captured one word: grace—and the definitive, historical, eternal expression of God's grace is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is why Jesus proclaimed, "God so loved the world that he gave his only son"—that is why Jesus said, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends"—that is why Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

Jesus' suffering in his passion and death could not have been any more vulnerable—and that is why the action of God's love can minister hope to you where you, like the Apostle Paul and like Jack McCall, are most vulnerable.

God's grace is greater than any shipwreck in your life, greater than any danger in your life, greater than any anxiety in your life, greater than any suffering in your life. God's grace is greater than every thorn in your flesh and assures you that at the same time your outer nature is wasting away your inner nature—who you *really* are as a beloved child of God, the *real* you fully known by God, fully loved by God, fully forgiven by God—is being renewed day by day and will continue to be renewed day by day until your outer nature has finished wasting away.

And even then the action of God's love will just be getting started, because again as Paul wrote in today's passage, "We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence... For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure,"

And in the meantime, even if you struggle from here to get there, or suffer from a thorn in the flesh—Jesus' words to Paul are Jesus' words to you, "My grace is sufficient."

And you are free to respond to the action of God's love for you by loving others—because the Lord has already taught you "the steps to that dance."

Amen.