

Sermon, February 25, 2024

2 Corinthians 4:1-12

“The Word Made Flesh in Us”

As we can see in both of Paul’s letters to the church at Corinth there were numerous problems and conflicts within the congregation. It was also a time when the early Church itself was also under attack from outside forces. Paul himself was also being criticized by factions within the congregation, and the opening verses of this chapter are part of his defense. He argues against the accusations that he and his followers are practicing cunning or that they are falsifying the word of God.

(Referring to the word of God he is either speaking about the Hebrew Scriptures, considering that the New Testament does not yet exist, or, he is referring to the gospel, i.e., the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ.). In chapter one he writes, “Indeed, this is our boast, the testimony of our conscience: we have behaved in the world with frankness, and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God. He will go on to “commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience, as well as to counterattack, accusing his critics of being charlatans, and refers to them as “those who are perishing”. He speaks of them also as unbelievers who have been blinded by “the god of this age”. Note that in this verse 4, the first letter in the word ‘god’ is not capitalized. In other words, he is not talking about God the Father - he is talking about Satan as the “god of this age”. He is blaming those who are unable to recognize, or see, the light of Christ, as being under the influence of this evil spirit, but it is God the Father who has revealed the light out of darkness - and the light that he is referring to is not seen with our eyes, but within our hearts.

In verse seven he then goes on to defend himself and others, saying, “But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” The treasure he speaks of is the light of Christ, as revealed in the gospel, and the clay jars represent our mortal bodies. Clay jars were used for various purposes in that time and place, and although they were fired to a certain hardness, they could still be broken rather easily. And, so, he is talking about the fragility of our existence as human beings, but then he goes on to say that despite that fragility, there is also a great degree of resilience. He says, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed”. Although he is addressing the faithful in the congregation at Corinth, what he is saying pertains to all of us when we maintain a life of faith.

He continues, saying this is because we are “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies”. What he is suggesting is that there is an intimate connection between the suffering of Jesus and our own trials and tribulations in this life.

In our lifetime we all face challenges and pain from time to time, which can be quite debilitating, but sometimes, in the long run, it is not always a totally negative. One of my favorite quotes comes from Tennessee Williams, who wrote, “Once you fully comprehend the vacuity of a life without struggle, you are equipped with the basic means of salvation”. What he is getting at is that sometimes the struggles we face in life are an opportunity to learn, to grow and mature - that without those challenges our lives would be quite empty and devoid of purpose. As Paul suggests, although “we are afflicted in every way”, we are not ultimately crushed, perplexed, driven to despair, or destroyed - particularly when we are open to the light of Jesus Christ, but not in the way that the world may see it. In this world we tend to honor such things as power and strength - and in some circumstances they do have their place, but in chapter 12 of Second Corinthians, Paul hears the voice of God saying, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness”. What this means is that when we reach our weakest point in the face of challenges and struggles, that is when God’s strength comes in. When we are hurting, feeling broken, on the verge of despair, if we cling to our faith God’s own strength finds its way into our hearts.

Again, there is a connection between our suffering and that of Jesus. Paul says, “For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.” When the trials of life begin to pile upon us, through faith we embody both the suffering and death of Jesus, but also the power of resurrection. In him we find the light that draws us out of darkness, and just as the Word became flesh in the person of Jesus it also becomes flesh in us - we discover within ourselves, New Life, which is made apparent to others, especially to those who are struggling to find their way out of the dark. Amen.

**Let us pray:** O Lord, our God, we are grateful for your presence in our lives, and, as always, seek the guidance offered to us by your Son Jesus and your Holy Spirit. We celebrate the fact that we can come together in your house to offer our worship, and to become a family grounded in love and mutual care. The apostle Paul referring to us as clay jars, referring to the fragility and sometimes broken state of human existence, yet within our hearts we also hold the treasure, which is the light of Christ showing us the way out of darkness. In this season of Lent, we acknowledge and confess that there are times when we seem to slip back into that darkness, and rejoice in your divine mercy that forgives, returning us to that light.

There are times when the trials and challenges of life knock us down, but in you we find the faith to get back up and carry on. For this we are eternally grateful and pray that you help us to grow in that faith. Amen.