

Trinity Sunday - Consolation

May 22, 2016

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: John 14: 25-27; 2 Corinthians 1: 1-11

"Consolation Prize"

May the spoken and written word lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the source of all mercy and the God of all consolation, who comforts us in all our sorrows so that we can comfort others in their sorrows with the consolation we ourselves have received from God.” These words are often used in the beginning of a Lutheran funeral service. They seem most appropriate. But as the beginning sentence of a letter, they carry a rather ominous tone. Paul greets the Corinthians and sends them his earnest hope that they know the “grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” But then it turns very solemn very quickly. In versed 3-11 Paul uses the words suffering or affliction 8 times; the words consolation or comfort 10 times. He will go on to mention a particular near-death experience of pain and danger he and Timothy endured in Asia. But it’s not the particulars of that event he’s interested in sharing with the believers of Corinth. It’s what he learned from that time of suffering he so urgently wants to convey.

“Learned from suffering?” Most people would not interpret experiences of suffering as times of learning. Paul does. Yet it’s not the more common question ---- “Why did God let this happen to me?” — that he dwells upon Paul assumes distressing things happen to people for two primary reasons: 1) because those who live doing God’s will like Jesus will be at odds with the world; or 2) because we are fragile, finite human beings living in a creation that is not how God originally created it.¹ Paul is not by any means condoning, glorifying, denying or recommending suffering. Paul did not want to suffer afflictions, pain, disappointments, alienation, a body that wouldn’t mend or the loss of loved ones but they happen in the normal course of this imperfect life on this side of eternity. With that understanding, Paul turns us toward what he has discovered about God and himself, faith and suffering.

“Blessed be the God ...who consoles us in all of our afflictions.” Paul discovered God’s immeasurable comfort in his times of distress. “That means,” one pastor wrote, “that when I am sick, God is there by my bedside. When I run out of money, God is there with me in my poverty. When I am hated and despised, God stands by my side. And when I

walk through the valley of the shadow of death, God takes me by the hand and God leads me on through.”² We may see that consolation in those who help us or offer encouragement. We may see it in the release of tears or those who hold us while we cry. Or we may not see any concrete evidence at all but that does not make it any less true. Comfort is not just about “feeling better.” Life-giving comfort is about finding strength to get through when you don’t see how it’s possible. God’s consolation is the dawning realization that there will be something other than the pain of the present. Our Lord’s comfort opens our eyes to be able to focus on someone or something other than yourself. The consolation of God doesn’t make the suffering suddenly stop. It helps us make it through to an open door and renewed life. That is the consolation God will always provide, whether we’re aware or not.

“We felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raised the dead.” Experiences like cancer, death of a loved one, chronic pain, broken relationships or, Paul “sentence of death” have a way of ripping apart any human pretense we may have about knowing it all or having control of life. Such experiences leave us vulnerable and tender. It’s awful. Yet.... yet, that is the very time we discover again that it is God whom we can rely upon. When things are crazy and you don’t know what to expect, God has not changed. God is still good. God is still reliable. God is stronger than anything in this world. The God who rescued Israel from slavery, the God who rescued Paul from so deadly a peril, the God who rescued you or me from sinking so low when it hurt so bad **will** rescue us again. Will it follow our idea of a rescue and land us where we thought we were going? Maybe not. Probably not. But when we let God into our afflictions, God will breathe life into our ashes, open doors where we only saw dead ends. God consoles. God can be relied upon.

“So that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God.” Paul discovered that the comfort and compassion God pours into our hurts are meant to overflow on others. Just like most of God’s gifts to us, consolation is not to be hoarded but shared. We are not created in God’s image to merely be a container for God’s love and comfort. We are created in God’s image to be a channel for God’s grace and consolation to flow onto others. Or in the words of Henri Nouwen, we are called to be “wounded healers,” those who have been made more compassionate because their own hearts have been

broken. “Wounded healers” have eyes that notice others who are hurting and who offer from their well of consolation the very presence, comfort and encouragement God provided them. Having survived afflictions can make us more receptive to the hurts of others and more willing to come along side and walk with them through their time of trials. In God’s hands, our difficult times can shape us to be more compassionate and more available. You can’t make the pain of others go away. You can’t take their affliction as your own. Yet out of our suffering arises meaning or purpose we couldn’t have imagined. The presence of someone who has come through the flames and flood, who knows there’s no way out but through, their presence — your presence ---- can make the load more bearable and hope more possible.

I once read that when hard times come you can either be a victim or a student.³ We can become paralyzed by the “why” and despairing as we think God is absent or punishing. Or we can hold on to God, trusting “God is at work somehow, somewhere, in some way for our good and his glory”⁴ and we will learn, somehow, someday, a way to live, be and thrive anew. Paul had plenty of experiences in the suffering category — tossed out of synagogues, beaten, rejected, stoned, run out of towns and imprisoned. Paul chose not to be a victim but to be a student.. Paul learned from his suffering that God was always with him, God’s deliverance was reliable and that through our own wounds we can become conduits, bearers of God’s own consolation. Even knowing all of this, affliction will still be difficult to endure, NOT due to a lack of faith but the fact of human frailty. Disciples are not exempt from suffering. But we belong to a church, made one in Christ, who will share our sorrows and celebrate our joys. We proclaim a God who will not let distress, darkness or even death have the final say. We believe that in the hands of God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit —not even our pain is wasted or meaningless for out of it we can grow in mercy, compassion and care for others. And so we too can pray in all circumstances, *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation.”* Amen

Linda M Alessandri 5/21/16

ENDNOTES

1. I found this two-fold idea in J. Paul Sampley’s Reflections on 2 Corinthians 1: 3-11" in The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vo. XI, pg.43

2. Dr. Rev. Ray Pritchard, “Why Is Life So Hard? November 27, 2009 as posted on <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/why-is-life-so-hard/> © Keep Believing Ministries

3. Dr. Rev. Ray Pritchard, "Why Is Life So Hard? November 27, 2009 as posted on <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/why-is-life-so-hard/> © Keep Believing Ministries

4. Dr. Rev. Ray Pritchard, "Why Is Life So Hard? November 27, 2009 as posted on <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/why-is-life-so-hard/> © Keep Believing Ministries