

Paul the Apostle had such a strong faith. We may disagree and find him culturally limited in some views, like his attitude toward women (insistence on women not teaching) or toward slaves (insistence that a certain slave return to his owner and serve him as he would Christ), but Paul also had much “soaring” wisdom and words of faith that have stood the test of time. One such example is the famous elevation of Divine Love in 1 Corinthians 13, “Love is patient, love is kind, love does not insist on it’s own way, etc.” What makes his letters to the Corinthian church powerful is that Paul was facing all kinds of affliction and persecution, from the Roman Empire, from his fellow Jewish Pharisees, and from the leadership of the Christian church itself. Paul writes in this second letter to the Corinthians that in his travels he feared for his very life, and that he wrote to them in tears. Paul was often beaten and put in prison during his missionary journeys, then add to that the sorrow of hearing about serious divisions in the church he had founded.

So in his second letter to his church he speaks a lot about comfort during sufferings or afflictions. He has first hand experience of receiving comfort from the Spirit of Christ. Paul emphasizes suffering often in his letters, saying that we participate in Christ’s own suffering, and therefore we will be raised up also with Christ. Paul seems to be saying that recognition of suffering as a part of life is a necessary thing, since it can even lead to deeper blessings, such as lessons learned, or courage, or faith. Paul starts this letter by identifying with Christ, mentioning Jesus’ suffering and afflictions, then he identifies with his followers, saying that the comfort he has received from Divine Grace and Love is the same comfort he gives to them. Paul insists that no matter what kind of suffering

we are going through, there is always new life and new courage, always some sort of transformation that can be at work.

In this second letter to the Corinthians, he emphasizes the temporary nature of suffering, compared to things that are eternal. Paul speaks of “slight momentary afflictions” compared to the “eternal weight of glory.” Now, of course we can argue that our afflictions do not seem slight or momentary; there is chronic sickness (physical or mental), and pain is inescapable, especially with the realities of aging. However, if we look at “eternal” truths, or what could be called the “big picture,” ... for most of our lives, the lessons learned, the physical limitations, the difficulties or afflictions are indeed temporary; as my mother and thousands of others have said: “This too shall pass.” I remember saying that about Covid 19 (after all, it started at the end of 2019)... sure enough, by mid-2021 it seems to be passing, or at least on a steady decline. Things may not return to “normal,” but there are some semblances of normalcy already this summer, summer camps opening, biking, hiking, families planning vacations, and groups now meeting in the Stage Room (windows open).

Add the element of faith, and not only will suffering eventually pass, but it can actually be transformed; it can be the seed of transformation, because suffering is one pathway to learn reliance upon God, to learn to trust in God, to let go of trying to control everything in our lives. Many people, in times of sickness, learn to focus on the things that are really important in life. Countless people testify that times of sickness or hospitalization have indeed been transformative to their relationships and indeed to the priorities in life (Carpe Diem!). Many say that Covid 19 has taught us many new ways of relating, and working, that the temporary

difficulties have taught us ways of staying in touch in more creative, and far-reaching ways.

I was struck by the devotional in These Days, June 4, where a woman describes her 84 years old husband's finding comfort in the eternal, lasting things of God, seeing afflictions as temporary. She says: "at 84, my husband suffers a wide variety of difficulties. Yet he frequently says, as we age life gets harder, but it gets better. He reasons that despite physical challenges, he is drawing closer to the Lord. Through study and prayer and continuing the work God calls him to do, he thrives... As we age, our bodies weaken, but we can remain strong, armed with knowledge that our future is with the Lord." Paul says it so succinctly in our scripture lesson: "though our outer nature is wasting away our inner nature is being renewed day by day!" Paul lifts up the eternal things, the "inner nature" that can grow, sometimes because of some suffering: In Romans chapter 5 he says: "we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit."

Paul was always pointing to this inner life of the Spirit, given by Christ himself; we remember that Jesus said the "Holy Spirit will bring to your remembrance the things that I have said."

On this Trinity Sunday we can think of the Holy Spirit as the living Spirit of Christ. The Spirit of Christ is alive because it brings to our remembrance all the things that Jesus said and did. Every time we break bread, any meal, we remember how he gave his very body and life for the needs of others. Any time the hungry are fed, or the naked are clothed, or the sick are visited, we remember Jesus saying "even as you did it to the

least of these, you did it unto me.” A heart and a helping hand for the poor and the needy are indeed eternal things, the things of our Christlike nature.

When we mention the poor and needy, we can't help but think of ways to change society also, so that there are less poor and needy! Evils, sufferings in society can indeed be catalysts for making change! We know that the murder of George Floyd, as well as numerous other examples of police brutality, gave impetus for the Black Lives Matter slogan and the BLM movement. We often say, many lives lost “not be in vain.” We look for the actual loss and suffering to have an effect for positive change. We look for the pain to be transformative. We look for a blessing or a silver lining. We add faith to the equation and say with Paul, “All things work together for Good, with those who love God.” Good can come out of evil, Courage can come out of adversity, sufferings can produce endurance, and character and hope, and resurrection can follow crucifixion, death can be swallowed up in victory!

So, as many say, Keep the faith! Surely goodness AND mercy will pursue us all the days of our lives. Many troubles and difficulties will indeed pass... the Psalmist also says it so poetically... Tears may linger for the night, but Joy will come in the morning. There may be temporary difficulties, but with the indwelling Holy Spirit, there are always “eternal” blessings: Hope, Peace, Love and Joy. Amen.