

“DO NOT LOSE HEART”

The Rev. Victor Kim

2 Corinthians 4:13-18

(06-06-21) Communion

As I look back on it, those many years ago, it seems like such a trivial thing, really nothing earth-shattering or profound, but the perspective of maturing years would not have yet dawned on a callow university student, full of vim and vigour, believing that I had the world by the tail. Then it all sort of came crashing down. That night was colder than any I can remember and the heater in the car I was driving back then only served to blow snow onto my face. In those days the cars had an engine heat gauge and for the entire journey that night the gauge never moved from its far left position, stuck on cold, freezing cold. I was miserable. Things had not gone as planned. People I trusted proved untrustworthy. I felt alone and despondent. But the next morning was church and so, I duly got up, dressed and joined my family in the pews. I didn't feel much like singing any of the hymns or listening to anything that was being said. Someone next to me sensed that something was wrong and she opened her bible and passed it to me. The text was 2 Corinthians 4, and the verses were underlined. ***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 us for 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.***

I'm convinced that the sharing of that passage that morning left a profound impact on my life and on my faith. We get so caught up in the immediate that we lose perspective about the big picture, especially about God's vision, one that vastly exceeds even the most expansive human ones. **There's a lot in the world today that might cause us to lose heart, either at an individual level or on a collective one, even on the level of the church.**

As you may know, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada begins today. In fact I am a commissioner to that gathering. Usually we fly to somewhere in southern Ontario, after all it's where the majority of Presbyterians live, and we gather for the better part of the week, talking, debating, praying and discerning over issues and finally we make decisions that we believe to be faithful and that will impact and affect the entire church. This year the only trip I'm taking for General Assembly is from my home to the church office, almost 3 minutes if the traffic lights cooperate. But this online format has many perils, including technology, access to a reliable internet connections and of course the old, but we've never done it that way before! But it's not the online nature of the Assembly that might cause one to lose heart, although it certainly plays a role. Rather, it's the fact that we are dealing with very divisive issues at this Assembly, issues around inclusion and human sexuality that have the potential to cause significant and permanent divisions within our denomination.

And the fact that we are doing all of this without the ability to look our brothers and sisters in the eye, to sit side by side as we pray and discern together, **it's enough to cause you to lose heart.**

And as the church we have been part of another story over the past week, the discovery of the unmarked graves which contain the remains of over 200 young children who were taken to Indian Residential Schools, such as the one in Kamloops. Though the remains were found in the grounds of the residential school in Kamloops, no one believes that it's the only school where undocumented remains will be found. Presbyterians ran 11 residential schools in our history and although our association with residential schools ended in 1969, the pain and suffering of those who were taken from their families, forced to renounce their culture, languages and traditions, still resonate with survivors and their descendants and the entire Indigenous community today. It's so difficult to understand what it is to live as an Indigenous person in Canada today unless you are part of the community. Most of us don't live with the constant stereotyping, the accusations, the judgmentalism from others. We don't live with the scar tissue of generations of abuse, exploitation and neglect. What has taken generations to do will take generations to undo. **It's enough to make you lose heart.**

And now, even as we make such strong progress in moving out of the pandemic that has gripped so much of the world over the past year and more, we recognize the damage that the pandemic and the restrictions have done, not only in terms of physical health, but also mental health, spiritual health, economic health, relational health, cultural health and more. We have seen unprecedented levels of anti-Asian racism, we may not know for years the impact of the mental health strains that have been endured by people, including many seniors and children. It's difficult to even contemplate the price we will pay economically, with all the money that has been spent supporting those who couldn't work, those businesses that couldn't open. And even with that support, we know that it hasn't been nearly enough for most. We know too many stories of people dying without having the comfort of family and loved ones near. I've done funerals for families who have had to say goodbye to husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, grandparents and others, having to stand at a distance, without the rituals of transition that have brought comfort at times of grief and loss. **Yes, we are emerging and things may start to look more like they did before, but the losses have been staggering and it's enough to make you lose heart.**

It's enough to make you lose heart to watch someone you love suffer and slowly be overtaken by disease or illness, especially before their time or young people struggling with additions and anxiety. **What about you? What is it that threatens to put you in a situation where you might lose heart?**

Consider Paul. We don't often give Paul the credit he deserves because he seems to be such a strong figure, a commanding presence in the early church, a man seemingly with boundless

energy, incredible courage and such steadfast faith. But all you have to do is to read through his letters to discover just how much he suffered and endured, how much he gave up, lost and willingly forsook for the sake of the gospel. This is a man familiar with beatings, imprisonment, near death experiences, shipwrecks. The theologian and author Frederick Buechner describes Paul this way. He was not much to look at. ‘Bald-headed, bowlegged, strongly built, a man small in size with meeting eyebrows, with a rather large nose.’ Years after his death that’s the way the apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla* describes him, and Paul himself quotes somebody who had actually seen him: ‘His letters are strong but his bodily presence is weak’ (II Corinthians 10:10). It was no wonder. ‘Five times I have received at the hands of the authorities the forty lashes less one,’ he wrote. ‘Three times I have been beaten with rods, once I was stoned. Three times have I been shipwrecked. A night and a day I have been adrift at sea. In danger from rivers . . . robbers . . . my own people . . . Gentiles. In toil and hardship, in hunger and thirst . . . in cold and exposure’ (II Corinthians 11:24-27). He was also sick off and on all his life and speaks of a ‘thorn in the flesh’ that God gave him to ‘keep him from being too elated. Was it epilepsy, something else, who knows? The wonder of it all is that he was able to get around at all!’¹

Yet it was this very Paul, who had more reasons to lose heart than most of us could begin to imagine, who wrote earlier in his letter to the Corinthian church, ***therefore, since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart... we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. 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. So death is at work in us, but life in you.***

You see, for Paul, while the sufferings and hardships of this world are real, very real, afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, **yet in carrying in the body the death of Jesus, we also know that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. 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.**

So we do not lose heart. Our outward nature may be wasting away, but our inner nature is being renewed day by day. And while these words may refer to our physical natures, I think it goes deeper than that. **Our outward nature isn’t only about our flesh and blood, it’s also about what we think matters most, what we think life is about.** It’s about what we place our confidence in, things like money, beauty, wealth, health, power, privilege, position **and it’s those things that are also wasting away as Jesus renews our inner nature daily.** Jesus renews

¹ Frederick Buechner, “Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who’s Who.” pp. 128-133

our confidence in things like justice, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, kindness, healing, grace and love. **Jesus reorders what life is truly about and makes us new creations in him.**

We don't look only at things that can be seen, those values that are fleeting and temporary, that don't and can't last, but we look at those gifts, those values, those beliefs and principles **that are not always visible but are eternal.** This is the source of Paul's hope and confidence. He knows that through Jesus Christ, through the one who has been raised, through the one whose life may be made visible in us, in our living, we have hope, unshakable hope. **We have the hope to not lose heart, to hold on with courage, to believe that despite what our eyes tell us, there is a truth that runs deeper, a truth that can't always be seen, but a truth that lasts.**

For the church that faces rough roads ahead, that must stare into division even as it prays for unity, for the culture that has to come to terms with its history and injustices, for a nation that must acknowledge a reckoning with its Indigenous peoples, for a world that will begin to truly contemplate and count the costs of the pandemic, in lives lost, in health compromised, in economic turmoil and political fallout, **there is hope.**

I say this, not to minimize the hurt and pain that we know, but to tell us that the only way we can deal with this hurt and pain, this grief and fear, this hardship and suffering, is to root our hope in the work God is doing to redeem and transform. The threat of hardship would be enough to drive most believers away, but Paul will stop at nothing to be a bearer of God's good news. He knows that the God who is at work in his mortal body is the same God who resurrected Jesus from the dead. **It is in this God whom Paul places his unwavering hope.**²

It is this God upon whom our unwavering hope must also rest. Do not lose heart. You might think that your world is falling apart, as young person, as a parent, as a grandparent, as an aging person, **but do not lose heart.** Trust that God is renewing you and do not lose heart. Trust that what we can't always see is more powerful and more true, most lasting than anything we know and trust that God is working behind the scenes, undercover, renewing us, transforming us, equipping us to live the kind of lives, be the kind of people, new creations in Christ, who will work for justice, for unity, for healing and reconciliation, as peacemakers and those offering forgiveness, those who practice repentance.

One of the things we can do in response to what God is doing is to continue these conversations with each other and to encourage one another in doing the things and living in the ways that follow the path Jesus sets before us as new creations in him. Our church is offering small groups called Connect and Reflect groups, starting off with just a handful of meetings, but these groups are places to discuss hard issues and share our hope in Christ

² Carla Works, Working Preacher, Commentary on 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1. June 10, 2012

as we listen, as we share, as we encourage and as we are encouraged. **I'd love to invite you to join a Connect and Reflect Group.** They're led by lay people, people like Steve and Janet Norris, who would love to connect on zoom with you, people like Heather Campbell who will take her group on walks and people like Isabel Evans who is willing to meet together in person to begin the long road back to post pandemic fellowship. Call the church and let us know that you're interested, and we'll put you in touch with a group. **And one more thing we can do in response to what God is doing** is to come to the table Jesus offers, the table of his love given for us, his life shared with us, in which and by which we become new creations in his love. **Come and be renewed, come and be restored. Come and do not lose heart. Amen.**