Sunday Sermon
June 7, 2015
“IS THAT ALL THERE IS?”
II Corinthians 4:7-9, 16-5:1
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Have you ever been at your wit’s end, when your whole world seems to be falling apart before your very eyes? When if you didn’t have bad luck, you wouldn’t have any luck at all? Have you ever experienced a sustained period of difficulty when you have to look up to see the bottom? A time when someone said, “Cheer up, things could be worse,” so you cheered up and they got worse!

Life seems to be closing in on us from so many different angles. Many who thought they had a secure job find the words “downsizing” and “right sizing” hitting awfully close to home. Change and uncertainty seem to be everywhere. If our own lives are not plagued with job problems, family problems, relationship problems and uncertainty about the future, all we have to do is turn on the television or pick up a newspaper to see a world in crisis --- with violence, unrest, distrust, fear and despair everywhere apparent.

Talk of problems and unrest may not seem appropriate on the Sunday we are honoring our graduates, for they represent promise and hope, and they certainly don’t need to hear a sermon about coping with adversity. Oh really? Do you remember what it was like in high school and college? Were your days stress-free? I think not! We who assume that these graduates believe they have the world by the tail don’t remember what life was like at 18 or 22 or whatever age you receive that degree. Besides that, I believe that the pressures and stresses of life are greater on this generation than they have ever been. I am convinced that children and youth today have to cope with more problems, and at an earlier age, than those of us who are older can imagine. A dad said recently, “Son, when I was your age...” His son interrupted his father and replied, “Dad, you never were my age.” In many ways, I believe the young man was right. It’s a different world than it was, even a few years ago.

With stress levels at an all time high, with mental and emotional health at a crisis point in our community and in our world, how do we cope? How do we navigate a stressful and oftentimes chaotic and topsy-turvy world? How do we deal with the setbacks and disappointments and pain that come our way?

The first thing I would say is that some stress and some experience with adversity is healthy for us and builds our character. All of us benefit when we are forced out of our comfort zone. I remember as a young Boy Scout being given an egg, two matches and a blanket and being told to spend the night in the woods by myself and enjoy breakfast! I won’t tell you what happened with the matches and the egg, but the experience certainly taught me to appreciate the comforts of home and my mother’s cooking!

I remember when I was first in the ministry, having some horrendous experiences and calling my dad, a seasoned pastor. Instead of helping me out of the jams I had gotten myself into, he would say, “Good experience for you!” I can’t tell you how tired I got of having good experiences! They say, what doesn’t kill you will make you stronger! In some of those early years of ministry, it was touch and go! We all know that when you pull a rubber band, it will stretch, and then bounce back.
with increasing force. But we also know that given too much tension, the rubber band will break. How much tension, how much stress, how many good experiences are we able to withstand?

Less than a month ago, *Time* magazine did a feature story on resilience, getting through hard times. The leading question was, why do some people and some communities survive stressful situations so much better than others? Are there identifiable coping strategies that are successful for navigating the storms of modern life? Following several years of scientific research at some of the nations’ most prominent universities, scientists have become convinced that “resilience is essentially a set of skills... that makes it possible for people not only to get through hard times but to thrive during and after them.” (1) Just as a rubber band rebounds after being stretched, so do resilient people.

So these scientists studied resilient people and their coping strategies and came up with ten “Expert Tips for Resilience.” And the number one tip, as a result of scientific research, reported in this totally secular magazine is this: “Develop a core set of beliefs that nothing can shake.” (2) For a moment I was not sure if I was reading *Time* magazine or the New Testament! These secular researchers sound a lot like the Apostle Paul, who reminds the people of Corinth and the people of Cleveland to look not at what can be seen, but at what cannot be seen. Referring to our current troubles as a “slight momentary affliction,” Paul is telling the Corinthians (and us) not to be discouraged, because what we see is not all there is! Set in a cosmopolitan city at the crossroads of the empire, the Christian fellowship in Corinth wrestled with conflicting cultural priorities and the clash of ethnic backgrounds. Paul’s words to the Corinthians speak as powerfully to the fractured factions of the twenty-first century as they did to the first.

Paul refers to our earthly body as a tent. Remember that Paul was a tentmaker by trade. Paul says what I read at every funeral, “If the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” (5:1) Have you come to a crossroads in your life? Are you more willing to trust in what is seen or in what cannot be seen? Have you developed a core set of beliefs that nothing can shake?

It was Peggy Lee in a haunting voice who used to sing, “Is That All There Is?” (Am I dating myself or what?) The answer, of course, from a Christian perspective is “No.” That’s not all there is. As Christians we look indeed beyond what can be seen to what cannot be seen. One of our core beliefs is that this world is not all there is. Thank God! Beyond what we can see and what we experience here and now, there is a whole new world that awaits us.

I firmly believe and nothing can shake my conviction that there is more to life than what we are currently experiencing. Paul says we have this treasure in clay jars. The “treasure” that Paul is talking about is life. Paul believes that life is a gift of God. It is precious, and it is made new and eternal by the gift of God’s son, Jesus Christ. One of the most enduring artifacts from antiquity is pottery. Archaeologists find and study bits of pottery because pottery stands the test of time. Having this treasure in clay jars means that we will endure, that we can bounce back, that we can survive whatever calamity or injury or disaster befalls us.

The first core belief that I want us to affirm this morning is that tomorrow will come. After the night comes the morning, the Psalmist proclaims. No matter how dark the night, you can’t hold back the dawn! The sun always rises. Every morning. Sometimes, when we are in the pit of despair, the pain of illness, the heat of controversy it is hard to keep a perspective. Keeping our minds on what is enduring helps us in that process. Mindfulness, which is defined as a state of active, open attention on the present, can help us become more resilient. When you are mindful, you observe your thoughts and feelings from a distance without judging them good or bad. Researchers tell us we
spend 47% of our time thinking about things other than what we’re actually doing! (3) Can we stay with the program? Can we focus on God and God’s love and God’s care for us?

A few weeks ago I attended a luncheon where the speaker shared his experience as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam for 6 ½ years. He told about being tortured by the North Vietnamese soldiers. Day after day he was required to stand against a wall with his arms in the air. If he lowered his arms, the guard would beat him. He got only fifteen minutes break in the morning and fifteen minutes in the afternoon. He said he got so weary, the only thing he could remember and the only way he could keep on going was to repeat the Scout oath, “On my honor, I will do my best.” Now the Vietnam War was a long time ago. Yet this man, George Coker, who is older than I am, said that every time he tells the story he relives the pain of that experience. He tells the story because it is a story of resilience. George Coker had a core set of beliefs that nothing could shake. He believed that tomorrow would come. And it did.

Nothing can shake my conviction that tomorrow will come. Secondly, nothing can shake my conviction that death is not the end for you and for me. It is one of our core Christian beliefs that death is not the end of our existence. “If the earthly tent we live in is destroyed,” I repeat, “We have a building from God, eternal in the heavens.” Jesus told his followers that he was going ahead of us to prepare a place for us. As Christian believers, that is our hope.

Not only do I believe that death is not the end of our existence, I also believe that death is not the end for those of us who remain on this earth. The death of one we love always comes as a blow to us. Sometimes we doubt that we can go on without that person. Sometimes we don’t want to go on. How lonely it feels without those we love to share our experiences. How alone we feel.

But after the shock and numbness go away, we must go on. We must continue to live. I remember standing in the emergency room of a hospital trying to comfort a woman who had just been involved in a car accident. The driver of the other car had died as the result of the accident. “Why was I spared and she was not?” the woman asked me. “I don’t know why her life was taken,” I said. “But I do know this: God has a reason why your life was spared. God has a purpose for your life.”

During her long and painful recovery, the woman felt the call of God upon her life to become a pastor. Her road was not easy, but eventually she went to seminary and became an ordained pastor and is today serving God as an Elder in the United Methodist Church. Death is not the end of our existence. There is life after death both for those who die, and for those who remain on this earth. Rose Kennedy, the mother of John and Robert F. Kennedy, both of whom were assassinated, and Joe, Jr. who died in a plane crash in World War II, suffered so much tragedy in her life. Yet she is known for saying, “Birds still sing after a storm, why shouldn’t we?”

Tomorrow will come. Death is not the end. And I firmly believe that God will never leave us nor forsake us. The Apostle Paul did not have an easy life. He describes his life as a missionary by saying that he has endured “afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, and hunger.” (6:5) He says he has been “afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed.” (4:8-9) Why? Because God has been with him, and Paul is convinced that God will never leave him nor forsake him.

“So we do not lose heart,” Paul says in verse one and again in verse 16. We do not lose heart because we look not at what can be seen, but at what cannot be seen. Is that all there is? Absolutely not! “For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” We trust, not in ourselves, not in some technique to increase our resiliency, but in God.
May each of us affirm the core beliefs that tomorrow will come, that death is not the end, and that God will never leave us nor forsake us. Yes, God is always with us. Thanks be to God!

Prayer: Dear God, sometimes we are almost overwhelmed by life’s problems. We are frustrated by illnesses and setbacks, depressed by grief and loss. Help us to remember that tomorrow will come, that death is not the end and that God will never leave us nor forsake us. This is our prayer, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Notes:
2. Ibid., p. 42
3. Ibid.

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