

June 10 2018

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

Our passage today is from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Folks at the church in Corinth were discouraged, because the church was facing a number of trials. Things on this earth fail. We fail. We fail each other. We get tired. Our bodies fail us. The things we build, they break. Churches. Communities. Roofs. Bricks. Washing machines. Cars. I'm not preparing you for any particular bad news. Just stating a fact – one that any of us whose bodies aren't what they used to be totally understand. Over time, things disintegrate. But despite this reality, Paul has a message of hope. Listen to these words from 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

So we aren't depressed. But even if our bodies are breaking down on the outside, the person that we are on the inside is being renewed every day. Our temporary minor problems are producing an eternal (remember eternal doesn't mean future – it means something that is beginning now) stockpile of glory for us that is beyond all comparison. We don't focus on the things that can be seen but on the things that can't be seen. The things that can be seen don't last, but the things that can't be seen are eternal – beginning now and lasting.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Some people have been tempted with passages like this to say the stuff on earth doesn't matter because - heaven.

But Jesus was all about the kingdom breaking in on earth. And Paul was all about how even here and now things are changing and we are changing.

Chris Cherry suggests that many of the things here on earth that can't be seen matter a great deal and these are the things that are lasting. And, often the way we experience the unseen is through things that can be seen. Why, he asks, do we rebuild houses? Why do we offer food? Why do people march for justice? It does impact and change for the better "temporary minor problems" in people's lives, but just as importantly, it restores hope, possibility and life to people.

And it produces faith in us. Those things are unseen and eternal. Instead of sitting by and waiting for heaven someday in the distant future, we can play a role in focusing on the unseen eternal things in the lives of others – here and now.

This past week 11 people from this congregation spent three days and an enormous amount of energy working their butts off in downtown Toledo. We cleared out classrooms and storerooms so that Collingwood could host a program for at-risk youth in their community, and we helped put in a community garden.

The Collingwood church is huge. At one point there had been a leak in the roof, so several rooms have dropping plaster. Much of it needs new paint, new wiring, new lots of things. The folks at the Collingwood church have an enormous challenge maintaining that building.

And there's some question about whether a community garden can endure. We put some picnic tables in the seating area, and they had to be chained together so they wouldn't get stolen. The hope is the garden will not get overrun by weeds, but that will take ongoing effort.

Some might wonder why we try.

Diana Butler Bass is a well-known theologian today. This week she tweeted an experience she had:

A small thing that happened in Washington today that won't make the news:

It is beautiful here this morning. I decided to go for a walk along the river. As I parked, I looked out on the water and it was sparkling in the sunshine. I ran up to the river bank and gave thanks for the day.

And then I realized that the river sparkled because it was full of plastic water bottles. Hundreds -- maybe thousands of them -- bobbing in the current.

It was so depressing. I wondered: How often does something seem beautiful at first glance only to turn out being garbage floating in the river? It seemed a sorry metaphor for life.

I walked on. Meditating on this. Then, just ahead, I saw a person kneeling near the pedestrian bridge at the edge of a small, muddy inlet.

I almost walked by her without stopping. But I noticed that she was picking something up out of the water. I wondered if she'd found a turtle. So I stopped, looked, and asked, "What are you doing?"

She glanced up. Her fingers were muddy. In her hand was a straw. Next to her was a bag, full of tiny plastic shards, straws, and bottle caps. "Oh!", I said. "You are picking up trash!"

"Someone has to do it," she replied. "Every little bit helps. And sometimes we miss the smallest pieces. They cause a lot of trouble." I stood in silence, watching her. She went on, "If we all pick up just a little, things will change."

Until that moment, I felt overwhelmed by the bottles on the river. As if I could do nothing, as if all the trash will just float downstream destroying all in its wake. But there she was: picking up straws along the shore. "If we all pick up just a little, things will change."

Being depressed turned to paying attention turned to hope. Just like that.

And I considered how her words are wisdom for many things right now.

Follow her example today. Remember the woman by the stream. Pick up small things. Do what you can. Your part.

Faith is both amazing and frustrating. Faith is what invites questions and what keeps us going. What step can you take today?

Martin Luther King is said to have said: "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."

Another story I came across this week in the same vein had to do with flip flop art. Have any of you seen it? In much of the third world, flip flops are the only shoes people have. You can imagine that flip flops become part of the garbage problem, the same way plastic bottles and straws do here. Ocean Sole is a company doing something about it.

(slide show)

In her devotional this week, Mary Luti named the reality that not all of us experience God the same way. Some people seem to have a warm, friendly, cozy relationship with God and talk to God all the time, and feel God's presence.

Others don't feel God's presence, no matter how much they want to. No matter how hard they try. They don't experience God with them and within them, and only know the absence of God.

It can be painful to feel like you can't seem to experience God. You can feel like a second class Christian. But the Christian life isn't just about having powerful spiritual experiences. Baptism ushers us into a life of greater depth than that – a life of faith. And every life of faith – even the warm and cozy ones – include a journey through the desert and dark.

Sometimes being the one who know the heartache of the absence of God is what leads us to the heartache of others, to others who feel abandoned by God and by human beings. For them we can be company. Being a small church, with a building that is hard to maintain, we can understand a downtown church that might be uncertain about the future God has in store. Perhaps better than some, we understand the need to know we are not alone.

For all who feel overwhelmed by the world, neglected by the world, the visible presence and labor of people of faith – who may or may not experience the presence of God - brings the eternal, the unseen, the hope of something new and better into reality.

Today we celebrate the transitions in our graduates lives as they move from high school into their future. At times, the world can seem overwhelming. The problems can seem so big. And at times we feel small, feel disconnected from hope, from the power of good.

Our prayer may be that even if we aren't experiencing God at any given moment, we can trust that God is as close to us as those who suffer are, and that in acts that bring hope and possibility, God is indeed found. I have to tell you that if we did nothing else this week we brought hope to the folks at Collingwood. They couldn't believe how much work we got done, and if Christine said it once she said it a hundred times – that she was so grateful and so happy and her heart was lifted and her spirits renewed.

I could be wrong, but my guess is that those who were trying to haul a ping pong table up three flights of stairs, and those who were trying to spread an enormous pile of mulch across what felt like half a football field, and those who were

carrying couches down stairways, and digging dirt trenches in the garden weren't experiencing the ecstasy of God's presence. They were hot and they were tired.

But they acted with faith. Though the work we do is temporary, though it may disintegrate, God was powerfully present - bringing hope and possibility – bringing things that can't be seen but are eternal.