

The Church of the Pilgrimage
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II Corinthians 4:7-12

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

The Cross Inside

Recently in reading a sermon by Peter Gomes I learned something I hadn't known before: in the Greek Orthodox tradition, when a baby, usually just days old is baptized after the baptism has been performed, it is apparently tradition for the minister or priest to take his very large pectoral cross – perhaps two or three times the size of the cross I wear today – and forcefully strike the infant on its breast, so hard it leaves a mark, and so hard it hurts the child and the child screams. (From a Peter Gomes sermon, "Outer Turmoil, Inner Strength", p.139 in *Strength for the Journey*)

The symbolism of the Eastern baptism is clear, indicating that when one is baptized into Christ, the cross – this symbol of sorrow, suffering, pain and death – is inescapably part of the package. How different from most Western baptism practices, where we gently make the sign of the cross in water on the forehead, and give beaming parents a rose, a baptism book, and a cradle cross. Please, don't get me wrong, our baptism practices do a great job of reminding people of what it means to be part of the church, of reminding us that we all are called to grow in faith and understanding, that we are all children of God, but they do not emphasize what the Eastern church does: that to become a disciple of Jesus, the cross is part of it.

Do we any of us really escape the hard parts of this earthly life? At my brother's wedding some months ago a cousin of mine I had not really talked with for decades approached me. He wanted to talk about what it meant to have parents nearing the end of their days. Thanks to the reality of divorce in his family, he had a dad, mom and stepdad – three parents who were all at this stage. He, this cousin, knew we'd experienced loss, and he knew I am a pastor so he wondered, I think, if I had any words to soften what he was so struggling with. My cousin wanted to talk about this for about, oh, two minutes. When I did not have a quick fix for his distress, a handy remedy for the human problem of sickness, aging, death he got back to his comfort zone, to other conversations, to more drinking and toasting of the bride and groom.

I felt sad about that. If he'd been willing to stay in it, we might have sat down, had an important conversation, shared a little heartache and lightened the load. It seemed he simply didn't have the stomach for that...I don't mean to sound hard on this cousin. He is, in many ways, so many of us at one time or another.

There are, of course, strains of religion—Peter Gomes calls this fashionable, cultural faith that work very hard to deny the painful side of life. Such religion assures us: If we just pray enough, attend church enough, give enough, if we just accept Jesus as Lord and Savior then we will be rewarded with all manner of good things. We will get a free “get out of jail” card, which is to say an exemption from this world of trial and tribulation. This is also known as the prosperity gospel, the notion that the reward of faith is success, continual pleasure, and a kind of protection from all trouble. The only problem, of course, is that this brand of religion is more distortion than truth. It denies the biblical record, for the bible is full of people who were faithful and were not spared suffering, Jesus being high on the list.

A preaching professor of mine was fond of saying “our lives are cruciform”. I think by that he meant that it is woven right into the nature of life to experience suffering and sorrow, pain and disappointment, and for each of us, eventually -- death. In this we follow Jesus. Just as he was not spared these things, we are not either.

I think of clergy colleagues I know who are really struggling with difficult dynamics in their churches, colleagues I know who work so hard and still their congregations languish. I think of church members I know who are exhausted by caregiving. I think of Emmaline in pain in her hospital bed, and of Emmaline's family waiting for her to heal, feeling helpless as she's had to go through this awful time. I think of David's family and their fresh shock and grief. I think of our church and the way each Sunday we voice our prayer concerns out loud – and this week it strikes me we are in this engaged in a counter cultural act. Yes, we have our celebrations, and we love them. But every week there are people with difficult diagnoses, young lives cut short too soon, there are things that are grievous, sorrowful, overwhelmingly sad in our lives and in our world. Every week we affirm that we can bring it all here, name this cross shaped aspect of our lives before God and one another, for that, at least in part, is what it means to be the church, to be real in this way.

However, when David Buttrick, (that's the preaching professors' name and he in fact died a few weeks ago after a long illness) when he said that our lives are cruciform I think he meant more than full of suffering and sorrow. For the cross speaks not only to Jesus death but also to his resurrection -- to a power that works in and through the crucified to come out on the other side, resilient and to bring forth new life. We do not have to wait for liberation later – after death. Liberation is available to us now.

“But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. 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 whole in our bodies."

As I read those words out loud, an image comes to mind. Once, when I was grieving, a friend reminded me of Jesus saying "In my Father's House there are many dwelling places." What if, this friend said, you imagined inside you, within you, a house with many rooms? When you are sad, you can go in the sad room. You can stay there a while. But it doesn't have to be where you live forever. You can come out of that room, for there are other rooms to visit.

You can return when you need to. You don't have to make it the only room. That was a helpful image for me, and it helped me work through my grief, be more patient with it, not be so afraid it was going to swallow me up, locking me up in that sad room forever.

So this week I wonder if maybe part of what it means to follow Christ is to have a cross shaped space inside. A place where we know it is natural, it is normal, it is part of being human to feel pain, to grieve and feel sorrow. As I leave each visit with my once brilliant dad who now lives in assisted living and grows frailer in both his body and mind, day by day, I can imagine that space, and see it as naming a human condition, my father's reality, my reality, and of course that of so many others too. I can see that space as a *gift*. First because rather than deny the pain or run away from it, numbing it with booze or shopping or some other distraction, I can simply name it, and better face it -- there in the cross shaped place. Second, that space is a gift because precisely where the sorrow is, there the resiliency is too.

This is what Paul was saying to early believers, people who faced real trouble if they followed Jesus. "There is a power within, a transcendent power, different from anything else, which keeps pushing back with equal pressure against whatever comes from without, so that we are not destroyed, not crushed, or despairing." That cross shaped space inside can be filled with a power not our own and it, that power, that transcendent power, is what will help us prevail.

Richard Rohr says that suffering is "whenever we are not in control". Again and again we find that we are taught how to live beyond the illusion of control, and to give that control back to God. In this, we become usable instruments, because we can share the power we do have with God's power.

"I am weak, but thou art strong". "A Mighty Fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing." So many of our hymns, so much of good religious music speaks to this -- Namely, that if God is in control, we don't have to be. And when we are tempted to ask "Where is God in the face of the world's suffering?" Music often reminds us that God is to be found precisely where God is most needed: in trouble, sorrow, sickness, adversity, and even in death itself.

So we turn to God in these times, these times when we most need to find meaning and purpose. In the National Cathedral Service held shortly after September 11th, 2001 Billy Graham quoted the old hymn “how firm a foundation”

*Fear not I am with thee, O be not dismayed!
For I am thy God and will still give thee aid;
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.*

Whereas the modern mind often, in the midst of chaos and distress asks where is God? The great old hymns assure us that God is with us, alongside us, *and perhaps most available* in times of trouble. These hymns, written so long ago, were written by people who knew turmoil. “They were written by people who in the midst of outer turmoil had inner strength.” (*Gomes, p. 146*). They were written by people who knew where true comfort is to be found.

Do you know the proper meaning of the word *comfort* by the way? It means “to fortify, to strengthen, to give courage, even power.” So much more than consolation! “The God of all comfort supplies what we most lack when we most need it.” (*Gomes, p. 147*)

Think too on the words we say when we offer a prayer for the baptized, as we did today for Charlotte: “Give to the newly baptized strength for life’s journey, courage in times of suffering, the joy of faith, the freedom of love, and the hope of new life through Jesus Christ who makes us one.”

We have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that it can be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God, and does not come from us.

Perhaps we none of us know this perfectly, all the time. There are times our whole lives long when we are tempted to wrestle control back again. But what our faith says, what baptism says, is that we have this identity: we are people marked by Jesus cross. We are ones who in outward turmoil, will be given inner strength. It is Jesus gift to us -- to Charlotte, to me, to you. Thanks be to God.

Amen.