

II Corinthians 4:16-5:1

Perspective matters

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Roy W. Howard

The other day I was asked “what you would tell your 20 year old self today?” That question is a remarkable way to gain perspective on what matters most. I suppose it’s a perspective that can only be gained after the experience, but it sure is helpful in sharing with others and especially in not getting overwhelmed by present pains. “This too shall pass” is often the phrase that gets you through a difficult patch in our life. Even when there is no evidence that “this too will pass”, it seem like a solid bet. Faith is like that. It can carry you through difficult stretches especially when you have a community of fellow travelers who have passed this way before. There are many things I could tell my 20 year old self - I’m just not certain my 20 year old self would be capable of hearing those things - so I think I would say above all else - keep the faith. Or some version of Buen Camino - Ulteia! The lovely word that means keep moving forward.

In his second pastoral letter to the fledging community of Christians in Corinth, Saint Paul is reflecting on his life and ministry - offering some perspective on the present trials that he and his fellows apostles are suffering for proclaiming the gospel of Christ. You get the sense that he is reflecting on his life, how he arrived at this particular place where he is under constant threat for proclaiming a message that years earlier - perhaps in his 20 year old self - he utterly rejected and sought to annihilate him. But something happened to Paul - then called Saul - that radically changed the course of his life and that of his companions. What happened? It’s summed up by the bumper sticker on my car: “Grace happens!” A bumper sticker can’t sum up a person’s life, of course, but for the record, I would be happy to have that summary be on my tombstone. Grace happened to Paul. He was given the spirit of Faith - the same faith, by the way, that filled the Psalmist that Paul quotes. Paul’s life was so filled with the knowledge of this astonishing grace that his entire life was consumed with telling others about it so that “more and more people” will be filled with gratitude to God.

Like most pastors, I have been asked many times “how did you become a minister?” I’m sure other are asked a similar question. How did you become a teacher, or a scientist or a engineer or a plumber or a mother and son on. It’s a great question. What I love about it is the opportunity to remember and share the astonishing - utterly unlikely event - of God’s grace in Jesus Christ becoming really real for me. The knowledge that I was loved beyond all my success and failures, sins and self doubts, buckled my knees and opened my heart to a new life of undeserved and unmerited favor. Grace happens! It’s the message that changes lives and puts everything in a new, wider perspective.

For Saint Paul, this certain knowledge of God’s transforming grace enables him to say “we don’t lose heart.” Of course, the pains of this present moment are real. Sleepless nights, battered bodies, constant threat - Paul was tortured for his proclamation.

Whatever pains of this present you may suffer are real. This is not a recipe for denial. And in the moment, it may seem impossible to have any other perspective that is larger than the present. When you are hurting the most and your friend says “this too shall pass”, something other than faith may rise up inside of you! Yet, the present suffering can be a narrow prison. (I must admit that with the birth of so many babies among us in the past few weeks and those on the way, I’m thinking of mothers and fathers in the wee hours of the morning. “This too shall pass” may seem like a sentimental saying, well-meaning but not so helpful. Perhaps it’s all about the timing. But I’m here to testify that it is true: that pains of this present moment shall pass.)

And this is what Paul is telling the Christians at Corinth. Our lives are lived day by day in the present - whatever joy or suffering comes our way. You can’t live any other way than in the present. Yet for the Christian the present is always part of something larger. Your life is lived in the light of God’s eternal promise of life beyond life. “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.”

One more thing: so much attention is given in our time to body appearance as the clearest sign of beauty and we know this has led to disastrous consequences. When reliance on the beauty of the body ignores the beauty of the human spirit, it leads to misery. We are reminded that as the body fades or suffers, the human spirit may still flourish. It is even renewed day by day. Ironically while gyms are filled with people looking desperately in the mirror to be certain their bodies are fit, there is widespread ignorance of the fitness of the Spirit. Physical fitness is great. Spiritual fitness will last much longer.

This perspective - from eternity - is the one you might give to a 20 year old self. It’s is the radical counter-story to the lie of this world which sees only the body and ignores the Spirit.

“For we know that if this earthly tent is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.’

Alleluia!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.