

APastor's Message – 6/23/24
2 Corinthians 6:1-13

We're kind of jumping into the middle today. We're kind of in the middle of a series revolving around Paul's 2nd Letter to the Corinthians. I've mentioned that the church at Corinth was one of the first churches that Paul started, and they are having growing pains and there have been back and forth letters from Paul and Corinth. The message from Paul to Corinth and to us is how do we live our faith day after day.

Paul is encouraging, begging, the Corinthians "not to accept this marvelous gift of God's kindness and then ignore it." (2 Cor. 6.1) How can one ignore the gifts of God's kindness, the gift of God's grace? Is that even possible? All the power, all the effect, all the working is in God's hands and not ours. At least that is how we understand it. Our job is simply to receive. We just open up our hands and grace pours in. That's how it works, isn't it?

God's grace is a gift. It is a gift that works in you and works through you. There are signs; there is evidence, says Paul; there is fruit when faith is not empty. Ignoring the gift means nothing is done with it, nothing internal and nothing external. Grace is transforming. Grace is fruit-producing. Grace is active.

As I was thinking about this Letter this week, I wondered if Paul is writing to you or if you are Paul, encouraging, begging, others "not to accept this marvelous gift of God's kindness and then ignore it." (2 Cor. 6.1) Perhaps you, evidenced by the faithful exercise and the good works that you do, could have written this Letter?

But there is fear in the air these days. Perhaps you haven't seen it yet, perhaps you saw the first one, but the most anticipated movie sequel of the summer, *Inside Out 2*, highlights characters named for the emotions 13-year-old Riley experiences — among them, fear, anxiety, and ennui.

There is fear in our churches, fear in our country, fear in our world. Some folks discount the gifts and grace of God in our midst. Paul writes that he has experienced the consequences of his faith, but carried on in spite of his fears and lives to tell the story.

I was impressed at an early age and still remember the quote. William Shakespeare put the words in the mouth of Julius Caesar, Act II, Scene II, "Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never taste of death but once." Or perhaps you've heard and remember the words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt from his First Inaugural Address, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

Two of the other Bible readings for today address the same theme. The Book of 1 Samuel tells the story of a war between the Israelites and the Philistines. It was a stand-off until the champion of the Philistines challenged the Israelites to a one-on-one, mano-a-mano duel, winner take all.

⁴ Then Goliath, a Philistine champion from Gath, came out of the Philistine ranks to face the forces of Israel. He was over nine feet tall! ⁵ He wore a bronze helmet, and his bronze coat of mail weighed 125 pounds. ⁶ He also wore bronze leg armor, and he carried a bronze javelin on his shoulder. ⁷ The shaft of his spear was as heavy and thick as a weaver's beam, tipped with an iron spearhead that weighed 15 pounds. His armor bearer walked ahead of him carrying a shield. ⁸ Goliath stood and shouted a taunt across to the Israelites. "Why are you all coming out to fight?" he called. "I am the Philistine champion, but you are only the servants of Saul. Choose one man to come down here and fight me! ⁹ If he kills me, then we will be your slaves. But if I kill him, you will be our slaves!" ¹⁰ I defy the armies of Israel today! Send me a man who will fight me!" ¹¹ When Saul and the Israelites heard this, they were terrified and deeply shaken.

You probably remember the rest of the story. David, in spite of good reason for fear, faced Goliath and defeated him.

And what about the gospel story from Mark?

³⁷ But soon a fierce storm came up. High waves were breaking into the boat, and it began to fill with water. ³⁸ Jesus was sleeping at the back of the boat with his head on a cushion. The disciples woke him up, shouting, "Teacher, don't you care that we're going to drown?" ³⁹ When Jesus woke up, he rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Silence! Be still!" Suddenly the wind stopped, and there was a great calm.

The people who will gather for worship this morning will bring all kinds of fears and anxiety into church with them. Perhaps they're waiting for the results of a medical test for themselves or someone they love. Perhaps it's climate change that is keeping them up at night. Or this

summer's sky-high electric bills because we may be facing another record hot summer.

The earlier quote from Julius Caesar really gets at another facet of fear and worry. Many people worry about things that may or could happen. Our imaginations cause more anxiety than actual peril. The difficult thing with anxiety and fear is separating what is really worth being afraid of, and what isn't. For those who truly struggle with anxiety and fear, it may be helpful to point out the disciples' reaction to being rescued was to fear in a different, deeper way. They stayed with Jesus, though he scared them. Faith, and a living faith, doesn't end fear or anxiety. They may be the truest marks of deep faith.

It's not that people of faith never face trials and challenges and failures. But it's like that nugget of baseball wisdom that successful players have to navigate: forget what happened yesterday; today is a new day. Don't take this wrong, but weebles wobble, but they don't fall down.

This is the day! "At just the right time, I heard you. On the day of salvation, I helped you." Indeed, the "right time" is now. Today is the day of salvation." (2 Cor. 6:2)

Theologian Paul Tillich made the same point in *The Courage to Be*, "Courage is the affirmation of one's essential nature, one's inner aim or entelechy, but it is an affirmation which has in itself the character of "in spite of."

Another, more modern theologian, perhaps some of you have heard of her, makes the same point. In the liner notes of Taylor Swift's CD "Fearless," she writes,

This album is called "FEARLESS," and I guess I'd like to clarify why we chose that as the title. To me, "FEARLESS" is not the absence of fear. It is not being completely unafraid. To me, FEARLESS is having fears. FEARLESS is having doubts. Lots of them. To me, FEARLESS is living in spite of those things that scare you to death.... It's FEARLESS to have faith that someday things will change... You have to believe in love stories and prince charmings and happily ever after. That's why I write these songs. Because I think love is FEARLESS.

Tillich and Swift made the same point. Faith isn't the absence of doubt, it's the conviction of something much larger, large enough to take fear into itself to a deeper, more resilient faith. Suffering is not the end of the line, certainly not the end of faith! Faith is the in spite of relentless trust in the acceptance, the reconciliation already in place. Right now. Right now is the time!

This is the day! “The “right time” is now. Today is the day of salvation.” What is this Church doing; what does this Church still have yet to do? This is the day.

The pandemic stopped us from passing the offering plate during worship, but I want to do that again today. Put your offering in the plate, but take the heart that is in your bulletin, write on it something that the church is doing or that you are doing because of faith and the marvelous gift of God’s kindness or write on that heart something that still needs to be done or someone or something you are praying for and put that in the offering plate. Those hearts are evidence that you and this church ARE accepting and not ignoring the marvelous gift of God’s kindness and grace.

“The “right time” is now. Today is the day of salvation. There is no need to wait,” says Paul. Effort can be expended right now; hope can be lived; grace can be full. Right now. Paul offers his own life, not as a boast, but as a sign that grace is at work in him and through him. There is evidence in the life and work of this Church and the members of this Church. But the road has not been easy. Grace does not make life simple or comfortable. If anything, it makes it more complicated and difficult. Yet, that is where grace is made full, where life is embraced. It is in the difficulties, in the heartaches, as well as in the joys and celebrations – in sorrow and in rejoicing – that grace is made manifest in individuals and the community of faith.

In spite of those who have ignored the marvelous gift of God’s kindness and grace, we carry on and push forward. Carry on to be a light and example of God’s love, forgiveness, and welcome to all who will accept it.