

Friends in Christ,

hardly any other New Testament passage seems further away from our daily concerns than this text from Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians.

It will demand a significant effort from you to make a connection with this text. So why do we not just leave it behind? It is one of the most significant passages of the apostle Paul's writing. Christians throughout the centuries have bothered with it, made meaning and memorized its key passages. When we agree to open ourselves to the difficulties in reading this passage and when we agree to suspend the need to immediately find a "daily life lesson" in it, then we will enter the world of "theology". We may find treasured perspectives on the big questions of life: On Living and dying, and on what is it all for, and what comes after this life, and where is God in all this...?

Theology, literally, means "Speaking of God". We don't do that much in our daily comings and goings, we speak of the weather, we speak of the kids, of the car or the dog, or of the pandemic...we don't speak of God when we line up in front of the bakery. But underneath the things we do speak about, our assumptions about God hover. Unless we are people who do not reflect at all on life and just live it, we inform our values and perspectives on daily life from our assumptions about God. Whether God is there or not, whether God is benign or judgemental, inefficient, or acting in ways that touch us, etc..

There is much more Theology or "God speak" around us that influences us than we would admit to or even notice. So it better be good "theology" than bad theology we listen to. And Paul is a very good theologian, - because he leaves simplicity and "black and white" thinking behind and explores complex ideas.

So I would like to explain the three key ideas I see in the 5th chapter, and outline some pointers as to how Paul's thought is indeed connected with our daily life.

First in chapter 5 he speaks about our human experience "in the body". While we live on earth there is for us, always an element of "alienation", and it is paired with a longing for home.

The second paragraph speaks about what the purpose of life is for a Christian person: it is “to please God” and, instead of living only for ourselves, it is to “live for Christ”. We will explore later what that might mean today.

And in the last part of the chapter Paul writes about what God has done for us: God has acted in a conciliatory manner in Christ, and we, in response, are called to be “ambassadors of reconciliation”.

The first of these big ideas acknowledges that **our life is not always harmonious, that there is an innate brokenness to it, and that therefore we find ourselves longing for “home.”**

How many forms and expressions this idea takes in “real life”?! As many different forms as there are people! You may find yourself at a strong and happy point right now, and so the idea of longing to be “with God” in a “heavenly home” may seem false or irrelevant for you. But even if you are not at the stage that Paul was (where he confesses that he is getting old and tired of all this “tent dwelling” on earth), you will know what it means to feel alienated from full life. There is an insatiable longing in all of us to get back “home” we know the longing but we don’t know what being home would look like, concretely.

For some that will manifest in improving the abode they have with carpentry projects or interior decorating. For some the longing shows in moving countless times, always on the look for “the perfect place”.

This week I happened to watch a documentary on the remarkable garden creation of a wealthy American in Quebec’s Charlevoix region. “Jardin des 4 Vents” is the creation of Francis Higginson Cabot on his families’ estate. In the documentary “the gardener” the 86 year old shares his joy and his vision of his life’s greatest passion, gardening. At the end he says “I think in every garden, big or small we are always aiming to recreate the garden of Eden”. That certainly rang true for me.

Paul says that we won’t ever truly be home until we are in the kingdom of God. Frederick Buechner wrote ““I believe that ... the home we long for and belong to is finally where Christ is. I believe that home is Christ's kingdom, which exists both within us and among us as we wend our prodigal ways through the world in search of it.”

Christ's kingdom exists within and among us and beyond us . If it is within us, we will be searching for ways to answer questions like these: When will all have enough to eat? When will the marginalized be able to live without constant worry? When will our table fellowship be truly inclusive and diverse? When will illness be healed, and when will the children suffer no longer? We can find moments of deep fulfillment here on earth, but we also walk for the most part “by faith, not sight” on this planet.

This begs then the question “But how should we live?” which Paul answers in the second part of the chapter.

Lois Malcolm, *WorkingPreacher.org*, 2015.asks:

"What gives us the courage to do the right thing -- to act on what our conscience calls us to do -- when we know that we often will not be rewarded for it in this life?"

Paul seems to say: “We try to please God in our living because we know that your reward is in heaven”.But for many of us in the 21st century such words have become hollow and meaningless. This is not saying that Paul is wrong, but saying that the thought of later reward has become unattractive for many modern people.

So is there anything else in his answer? Absolutely.

What matters more today, I think, is how Paul describes the Christian life on earth as transformed by relationship. Take Marriage or life partnership, they transform a person; for better for worse. It has been wisely said that you should ask yourself before marrying someone “Do I want to be transformed into being more like him/her?” Because that will undoubtedly happen. \Any committed intense relationship changes you over time, and the same is true for our relationship with Jesus, the Christ.

When we choose to become Christian or, were baptized as children and choose to stay and grow in the Christian faith we choose to let ourselves be transformed by Christ because we love Christ “ For the love of Christ urges us on”, and “ if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (vs. 14,17)

Our motivation to do good then, is the relationship we desire in the present with Christ, not so much the promised “reward”. This relationship is transformative right now.

Why a relationship with Christ? Many of us are plagued by severe anxieties. We feel ultimately alone, disconnected and solely responsible for everything that happens in our own life (and in the world). We are influenced by a culture that values “success” and individual accomplishments. No wonder we are overburdened. Mothers and fathers worry excessively about their children. Children worry terribly about succeeding in school and about having friends. Teens are anxious about “pleasing” their peers and being accepted, young adults are anxious about roles and expectations, finances, health, building a life, all of us worry about the ecological catastrophe and the future of the planet, and yet it seems that each is struggling alone.

Who or what helps anchor all these individual anxieties in a greater perspective and hope? Wonderful counsellors and communities of friends -, but how can we do without “THE” “Wonderful Counsellor”, without God in Christ? Trust in God as present in history does spur me on to act morally but it also keeps me sane as it places me in a greater perspective of humanity’s “we” story on this planet.

Our relationship with Christ does transform us in many ways,, leads us into situations we would never have taken on on our own, and helps us to see ourselves in a new light: We are important, cherished individuals, but we are no longer the sole reference point, our “ego” is no longer the ultimate reference point of our actions. This eases our fears. “He died for all, so that *those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.*”(verse 15)

So what has God done for us?

In verses 17-21 Paul writes about the “ministry of reconciliation”, which God in Christ practiced. Now the Spirit of God draws people into this same “ministry of reconciliation”. For a full life we need to be reconciled with ourselves, and especially our dark side, our sinfulness so we can be reconciled with others. No one who hates themselves can love another.

It is beautiful that in our age, when many have left the Christian faith (perhaps because of a misunderstanding of what its about, or because of anger with the people who have harmed others while calling themselves Christians) that people like Tikh-Nat Han, the American Buddhist monk reach a very large audience with writings which are perfectly compatible with Christ's teachings. In the Christian story we learn that God in Christ has gone into the darkest abyss of human hatred and sin. That happened as he went to Golgotha. "Once and for all". One historical event with a significance for past, present, future. In him on the cross, says Paul, is God fully present in the deepest dark of the human soul and body.

God present in Golgotha is still happening today. When an aunt dies of Covid behind closed doors in a nursing home, and I want to rage and scream that I cant go and be with her, I may now believe that God is in that room with her, even as Jesus died on that cross so lonely, yet God was there.

Paul loves the Christ not only for what Jesus did during his life on earth, but for his self giving death and the power of the resurrection. In this perspective of the defeat of death we need not be afraid anymore. With Christ's resurrection, death and destruction never have the final word.

This faith , which looks again and again at the risen Christ, who still bears the wounds- helps us overcome the fear of death and of everything that has to do with it: the fear of failure, of becoming unforgivably guilty, of getting hurt. Jesus is risen and God has transformed all that with the power of Love! Faith, which looks again and again at Christ crucified and Christ risen, and reads this as something that happens "for us" so that we may live lovingly and fearlessly, is a treasure store of psychological healing!

In Christ, God reconciles with guilty humanity. Not with the sin, but with the sinner. That is a big and important difference. Now we Christians are called to ourselves engage in the ministry of reconciliation,

So, Paul writes , we plead :”be reconciled with God”. Believe in Love, Goodness. The goodness of creation. In the brother and sisterhood of all people... Christians plead by example, and if it helps, with words.

Accepted, and loved by Divine Love, we are now free to love in return while we live on earth.

And when we die, why would Divine Love not sweep us up in her eternal arms?

Friends, all these thoughts come from the apostle Paul. He was the one to speak of God as one speaks of a person one loves and cherishes deeply and passionately,. He was th e one who made meaning of the terrible events of Golgotha. He was the most prominent “theologian” of the earliest days of our faith.

Now its time for you and I to go back into all that normal talk : of the weather, and of the car, or kid, or dog or the pandemic...and I hope that once in a while you pause and reflect on YOUR underlying assumptions about God and the world!

Have a beautiful summer week.