

## Sermon for July 5 – 2020 The circle of Comfort

Friends, thank you for tuning in, listening or reading.

It means a lot to me knowing that when I write these reflections there is someone at the other end for whom I write this. Unlike in the face to face services, I don't know of course who receives my words. Sometimes one wonders "Anyone out there? Listening?" But its been encouraging to see that people check into our website, locally and from further away and that the numbers are higher than the number of people who would normally hear a "live" Sunday sermon.

Just recently someone said to me "almost anyone I know is just hanging on by a thread"- referring to the situation brought upon us by Covid 19. After 5 months of isolation its especially hard for the elderly among us, and those with other health issues. I hope that today's theme of "consolation" will bring some encouragement especially for you.

Today we begin a 5 week series on Paul's 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to the Corinthians . This letter is a really good fit for a pandemic! Paul speaks so honestly and personally there about his struggles and about the good news in Christ in times of stress or "affliction". He adresses topics that are almost taboo in our society, yet we long to hear about them. How do we find strength in our physical weakness, how does one forgive immense hurt, how are we comforted in difficult times by our faith? He, a man writing to people who have proven that they can say and do hurtful things -he is not ashamed of his feelings, fears, anxieties. I am confident that in these five weeks you will not only get a better understanding of the apostle Paul, but also of God's presence in this difficult time with you personally.

So we read in the opening lines of the first chapter.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God" (vs.3)

Consolation, or comfort in "affliction" this is the experience we are invited to reflect upon.

Who comforts you? What comforts you?

I am recording this under a tree and perhaps you hear birdsong in the background. The return of the birds to my backyard gives me consolation in this pandemic.

Do you still have a Mom living? Is she still able to comfort you the way she used to when you were younger? And if not, now, where do you go? Do you even admit to yourself that you need comfort? Often we hear the "inner judge" say- "you are not a child anymore"- "pull yourself together" now. I so often hear adults apologize for their tears. We get rewarded for being brave, for not showing our hurt, so this is not surprising.

Paul is not ashamed of his tears and freely admits the need for consolation. Does this make him weak? Or does this make him credible?

Just because we are grown up the hurting does not go away. On the contrary. We have more responsibility and less support. I like it that in the Isaiah 66:13 God says: Come to me as your mother, especially now that you are adult. Because the verse literally says "As a man is comforted by his mother so I will comfort you". The accurate translations have "as one is comforted by one's mother", but often you will read "as a child is comforted by its mother..." which is not what the original says at all! Is it that offensive to us that a grown man would need comfort?

Well, Paul takes us right into that territory.

It seems that the Corinthians found the amount of suffering that came Paul's way offensive.

Why is there so much hardship? Why can the Christian God not arrange history so that there is less affliction for everybody? Why, if Paul is really a true apostle of Jesus Christ, does he run into so many

problems? Shipwrecks, arrests, circumstances that force him to change his plans? These were some of the questions the new converts in Corinth had about Paul. We remember that after he had spent 18 months there and built the church, other Christian teachers and apostles followed him, and the locals began to be drawn to an easier gospel. "Success oriented", attractive and enthusiastic, that's how they wanted their leaders, not someone with a visible handicap like Paul who preached a crucified God. It sounds like they wanted to believe, just like many do today, that life without hardship is possible if only we line up our ducks in the correct row. Like they wanted to believe that God would protect them from all harm, make their life easier. After all, if not- what good is God?

After Paul started to follow Jesus his "outer" life became worse while his "inner" life flourished. As someone who was a respected Jewish teacher and Roman citizen he presumably had all the comforts one could wish for. As a persecutor of the followers of Jesus he had the comfortable upper hand. Until he was stopped on the road to Damascus and his life took a completely different turn. Bringing the Gospel of God's inclusive love and the offer of salvation in Christ to people around the Mediterranean resulted in countless discomforts, physical and mental sufferings. Yet, Paul was happy, because he had found God in Jesus the Christ.

Today as Christians we share the vulnerability of every human being to disease, loss and terrible grief. There is no special treatment for those who follow Christ. Rather, many suffer possibly even more, because the way of Christ is so contrary to the ways of the world.

We suffer from the effects of our compassion, (com-compassion=suffering with) the effects of our sensitivity, from the effects of advocacy for those who have no voice, we suffer because we care for those who are oppressed and forgotten, we suffer because we don't cultivate a "thick skin". And we may suffer also because the general culture constantly ridicules or even persecutes that which Christ brings.

We do not and must not glorify suffering, never. But suffering is. Loneliness is. Being ignored or made fun of is. Breaking a hip and waiting for surgery for months is. You are happily married and your lifelong partner dies. This is. Your day goes fine and then you receive a terrible phone call that changes your life for ever. This is. Self doubt is. So then ---what good is faith? What good is Christ then?

Divine love says: Come to me, all you who are weary and heavily burdened, and I will give you rest" "Come to me as one comes to his mother". I am there to guide, to strengthen, to comfort, to help you.

We suffer affliction, but we receive powerful comfort as well. And in a strange beautiful mystery it seems that the more hardship we face, the more we may feel God's presence in Christ at our side. Have you ever experienced that?

Why would that be? Because our God is "the God of compassion and of all consolation" (vs.3)

So what does God do for us?

"Blessed be ...**the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction**, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God"

What is consolation?

We need to look at that word for a moment that Paul uses over and over.

The Greek word for "consoling" or "comforting" is para-kalein. Para means "next to" or "alongside" and kalein means to call out, or speak. We know that word from John's gospel, when Jesus, shortly before he is arrested and killed, tells the disciples that the "paraclete" will come. This is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the power of God that is alongside the disciples when Jesus is gone from earth. (John 14:28, John 16:17) The "comforter" stands by us, as Jesus stood by the disciples when he was alive and accompanied them.

In other words, when we suffer affliction and feel alone, we are not alone. God "stands by us". In compassion God consoles, comforts. It can be comforting "like a mother" (Isaiah 66), it can be like the comforting presence of a lawyer who defends our cause, it can be like the comforting shoulder we cry on, it can be an act of healing that literally "fortifies" us.

But I don't always "feel" it. I feel abandoned by God. The situation seems endless, no betterment in sight. I cry: How long, God? Why am I not feeling your presence? Why are you not using your "power" to change my lot? Even Paul cried thus more than once. And then he finds that his ailments may not be taken away – but Christ is rock solid. In the strange mystery of our core faith story the greatest moment of despair -can be a trail that leads to God. For it leads straight to Calvary. "My God, my God why have you abandoned me?!" Are there more powerful words? In them meet the utmost feeling of separation from God and the utmost desire for God at the same time. And these feelings are part of our faith. When I cry thus I am not unfaithful nor "godless". Job cried thus, and Jesus. There are moments during which God's comfort can not reach me, I just can not feel it. But the story of Calvary is not all. Is not it. The deepest depths of our despair are not godless because God is in the despair in Jesus on the cross, and Easter is coming. The door to new life is open. When we will be led through we dont know. But we hold on to the wondrous story of Divine Love which does not end on Calvary. And we may find that comfort comes to us out of the depths of discomfort.

The grand old stories of our faith are stories of transformation, and none is grander than the Easter story. Could this be the ending we cling to in our darkest moments? Why not? Why not believe with all our might in the promise of Divine Love and compassion, why not believe in the presence of the compassionate heart of the Creator with us, why not believe that we will meet our loved ones again, why not trust that there will be a time when "all tears will be wiped away from our eyes" and that even after this life is over "There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (Revelation 21:4) Who says it can't be?

God does not protect us from all harm. But God's nature is to console us. "the Father of compassion or mercies, the God of all consolation...while we live on earth we are afflicted, children and youth and adults are afflicted, but God's nature is to hold us and comfort.

And how does that happen?

Think about your own life experiences.

For me, it happens in nature. I fondly recall a moment from last summer when I stood next to a giant redwood and took all the time I wanted to simply wrap my arms around it and be comforted by its immense strength and life experience. It happens in music. I chose Liza's "consolation" piece for you as an example of that. It happens in a surprise visit that breaks through my loneliness. It happens in and through the words of scripture that are so tried and true for countless of generations in countless hardships. It happens in the dog who presses herself against my legs when I cry. It happens in the person who listens when I need to speak. It happens in the person who takes up my case when I don't know any more what to do or where to go. Something we must remember though, especially when we don't feel comforted is-that it takes two to be comforted: One who admits to their affliction and their need, and another to "stand by" and strengthen. This is true in prayer of course when we admit our need for God, but also beyond that: Only when I admit that I feel helpless, or sad, or lonely or deeply grieved, can comfort come to me, can another ring the door bell, make the tea, or invite me to an outing. That is the part that is so difficult for us today.

All this is God's consolation you may say? I believe so. After all, God is the Holy Spirit, the comforter, the advocate, now among us.

But it does not end with being comforted. Paul, writes we receive comfort.. **so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God**". Comforted we become agents of consolation for others; channels of the Holy Spirit, of God at work in us, so we can continue the work of comforting.

I am always amazed at how simple it can be to be a comforting presence. "That was such a comfort to me" the elderly woman says. "You dont know how much this meant to me". And all I did was to set my ego aside for an hour. All I did was to be all ear, to listen, to ask questions, all I did was take the time to "stand by" "sit by" and not think about myself for a while and only about her.

We each need comfort in these times. And we each are equipped to give comfort to one another. Thanks be to God! By grace we dance in the circle of consolation as long as life endures.