

One Sunday in June, 6-30-19 The First Church was blessed to hear a message by Dr. Josh Kerckmar, Assistant Professor of Environmental Humanities at Unity College. We are pleased to reprint it in our Messenger. It is entitled “God’s Power in Weakness” and is based on 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14, Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20, Galatians 5:1, 13-25, and Luke 9:51-62. We are fortunate to have Josh and all the Kerckmars among us.

It’s easy to feel God’s absence these days. For one thing, scientists tell us that the world is dying. The Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson writes that our “current rate of [species] extinction is between one hundred and one thousand times higher than it was originally, and all due to human activity.” A recent report says that climate change poses an “existential threat to human civilization,” and that if the world doesn’t do something soon, by 2050 we will see drought, starvation, and war on a scale that we can scarcely imagine. If 2050 seems far away, we have only to read the news, where we see poverty, war, race violence (and the list goes on) around us today – all evidence that we live in what St. Augustine, in the fourth century, called a “valley of tears.”

Three of our scriptures today allude to God’s absence, to his leaving. In 2 Kings, we find Elijah going “up to heaven in a whirlwind” (v. 11), leaving Elisha behind. We get a mirror image of this in Luke, who recounts how Jesus and his disciples were traveling to Jerusalem through a Samaritan village, “as the time approached for him [Jesus] to be taken up to heaven” (v. 51).

In the ancient world, if you were traveling any distance it was common to stay the night at the home of some person who was along the way to where you were going. But the Samaritans were particularly hostile to Jews who were on their way to observe religious festivals in Jerusalem, as Jesus and the disciples were. It was at least a three-day journey from Galilee to Jerusalem through Samaria, and Samaritans routinely refused overnight shelter for the pilgrims. So, when Jesus says that “foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (v. 58), he’s speaking in the immediate context of these unwelcoming Samaritans. He conveys the idea that the path of true discipleship can be lonely.

Our Psalmist (in Ps. 77) also develops this idea of

aloneness in the world, and takes it even further, wondering whether God will ever return:

⁷ “Will the Lord reject forever?

Will he never show his favor again?

⁸ Has his unfailing love vanished forever?

Has his promise failed for all time?

⁹ Has God forgotten to be merciful?

Has he in anger withheld his compassion?”

When we find ourselves in position of feeling alone, of feeling weak or powerless – wronged by the world around us – we sometimes take the self-righteous approach of the disciples. When the Samaritans don’t welcome them, they ask: “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them” (v. 54)?

That same self-righteous approach can sometimes shape entire institutions. The early church, for example, was persecuted to no end, was filled with disciples who had nowhere to lay their heads, and it had no official support until Constantine legalized Christianity almost 300 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. But strangely enough, the church in Galatia responds to this situation not by welcoming the stranger, but by making it harder for people to join the church! The Galatian church was under the influence of so-called “Judaizers,” who believed that certain practices in the Old Testament were still binding on the New Testament church – including circumcision; that it wasn’t enough to believe in Jesus as the risen Lord and practice his teachings, but that you also had to do all this other stuff prescribed by Old Testament law in order to be part of the church. It was legalism.

The Galatian church’s response to a difficult world – a world that was arrayed against it in so many ways – was NOT to set itself apart from that world through radical love, but rather to create divisions

within its own ranks that were the very opposite of love – which is why Paul urges them to “serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other” (vv. 13-15). And then he gives them another way: “The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law” (v. 22).

In our times, we still feel this temptation to institutional self-righteousness in the face of weakness or powerlessness. In my work as a historian, I see it in the South during Reconstruction following the abolition of slavery. Southern states, which were so dependent on slaves to produce wealth for so many years, suddenly found themselves after the Civil War in a position of weakness – stripped of their productive power, surrounded by former slaves, and with little hope of recovery. So, what did whites do? They started to draw those dividing lines, first in the form of “Black Codes” that put a disproportionate number of free blacks in prison for petty crimes; then, later, through Jim Crow laws that helped create a permanent racial underclass in America – which Northern states helped to solidify.

Why did the disciples, why did the Galatian church, why did Southern legislatures, why do WE not embrace weakness, aloneness, powerlessness as our ally, rather than our enemy? Well, it’s obviously hard. It’s not in our nature to do. It’s far easier to go along with what our friends, or our government, or sometimes even our church says, rather than take the road less traveled.

But as Henri Nouwen, who was a Dutch-Catholic priest, writes in his book *Compassion*: “Jesus’ whole life and mission involve accepting powerlessness and revealing in this powerlessness the limitlessness of God’s love.”

Augustine agrees. He asks in his “Homilies on the Psalms”:

“What is a valley of tears? ‘The Word was made flesh among us’ (Jn. 1:14). What is a

valley of tears? He has turned His cheek to those who would strike him and was covered with opprobrium (Lam. 3:30). What is a valley of tears? He was scourged, covered with spittle, crowned with thorns, nailed to the cross.

And then Augustine says:

“From this valley of tears you must ascend. But ascend where? ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’ (Jn. 1:1) . . . He descended to you so as to become for you a valley of tears; He abode in himself [because he was with God in the beginning] so as to be for you a mountain of ascent. And ‘In the days to come,’ said Isaiah, ‘the mountain of the Lord shall tower above the hills (Is. 2:2).’”

For both Nouwen and Augustine, the mountain doesn’t exist in spite of the valley. It exists because of it. Hope doesn’t exist in spite of suffering. It exists because of it, and through it. Power doesn’t exist in spite of weakness. It exists because of it, and through it. You can’t have one without the other, so that any attempt to escape the valley of tears – to live on the flat land where there are no valleys – means that there are no mountains. Ascent is no longer possible.

Our Psalmist agrees with both Nouwen and Augustine. After wondering whether the Lord will reject forever, whether his love has vanished forever, we see that this position of weakness becomes the very ground of strength: “Then I thought . . .” [note the beginning of movement out of the valley signaled by the word “then”] . . . I will remember the deeds of the Lord . . . I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds . . . With your mighty arm you redeemed your people” (vv. 10-12).

It’s precisely the questioning and suffering that makes redemption possible.

As a middle-class American, I’ve been challenged recently about my own response to suffering. I just finished reading a book called *Steppenwolf*, by the German author Herman Hesse. Hesse is writing in

1927, between WWI and WWII. As he looks around, he sees people who are angry with the German government for accepting the very humiliating peace terms of the Treaty of Versailles (following WWI). These Germans are humiliated, but at the same time they're trying to forget about that pain and humiliation and isolation by making themselves comfortable – by leading quiet, normal, middle-class lives.

But the central character in the book, Harry Haller, questions middle class society. He questions whether it might be more genuine, rather than hide behind the veil of social normality, to get back in touch with his own raw animal nature, reject middle class society altogether, and be transformed into a wolf (yes, a wolf), even though that is the more difficult road.

One of the critiques Hesse levels against bourgeois society is that it insulates people against truly living. “At the cost of intensity,” Hesse writes, the person who settles down to a bourgeois life

“achieves his own preservation and security. His harvest is a quiet mind which he prefers to being possessed by God, as he does comfort to pleasure, convenience to liberty, and a pleasant temperature to that deathly inner consuming fire. The bourgeois is consequently by nature a creature of weak impulses, anxious, fearful of giving himself away and easy to rule. Therefore, he has substituted majority for power, law for force, and the polling booth for responsibility.

But the problem with all this comfort – with this attempt to escape the valley of tears – is that the middle-class person, according to Hesse, “is resolved to forget that the desperate clinging to the self and the desperate clinging to life are the surest way to eternal death, while the power to die, to strip one’s self naked, and the eternal surrender of the self bring immortality with them . . .” The “tendency” of the comfortable middle-class person, Hesse writes, “is to explain [perfection] just as a schoolmaster would, as a supreme and special gift rather than as the outcome of . . . immense powers

of surrender and suffering . . . of patience under that last extremity of loneliness . . . that loneliness of the Garden of Gethsemane.”

It was C.S. Lewis who said in *Mere Christianity* that

“the Christian religion . . . does not begin in comfort; it begins in . . . dismay . . . In religion, as in war and everything else, comfort is the one thing you cannot get by looking for it. If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end: If you look for comfort you will not get either comfort or truth – only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin with and, in the end, despair.

Maybe the problems we see around us do represent the end in some way. Maybe we have reached the climate tipping point, beyond which all is lost. But if the inverse logic of the Gospel message is true – that suffering and weakness lie at the root of healing and strength – then perhaps suffering, discomfort, isolation, and loss can be beginnings as well: the beginning of faith in God’s power to redeem and heal, and the beginning of action on all our parts towards realizing God’s radical love in the lives of people, and all the other animals, around us.

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