

“Christ’s Triumphal Procession,” 2 Corinthians 2:12 – 3:6 (Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 19, 2019)

When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, <sup>13</sup> my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia.

<sup>14</sup> But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. <sup>15</sup> For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, <sup>16</sup> to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? <sup>17</sup> For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? <sup>2</sup> You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. <sup>3</sup> And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

<sup>4</sup> Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. <sup>5</sup> Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, <sup>6</sup> who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

## PRAY

We are studying 2 Corinthians on Sunday mornings this summer, and our passage for today is unique in all the New Testament. In it we have the beginning of the longest digression in all of the apostle Paul’s writings. He starts an idea at the beginning of 2 Corinthians, but in verse 13 of chapter two he breaks off his thought and doesn’t pick back up until verse five of chapter seven.

That’s significant. When you study the Bible and come across something like this you should want to know what Paul was up to. You need to ask, “Why does he make this ‘great digression’?”

We need a little background before we can answer. Paul started the church in Corinth. He lived there for at least eighteen months; we read that in Acts 18. That’s enough time to fall in love with a group of people, especially if you are the one that first told them about Jesus and served as their first pastor. Paul cared deeply for the church in Corinth.

But after he left Corinth to continue his mission of starting churches all over the world, a revolt broke out in Corinth against Paul’s leadership. Corinth was a wealthy city. The people there were accustomed to only the very best, and some segment of the church didn’t think Paul was the very best. They thought they could find someone better than Paul to minister to them.

We get an idea of their objections in 2 Corinthians 10:10, where Paul writes about himself. “For they say, ‘His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.’” Paul, apparently, was not a handsome man. It’s fair to say that in early Christian art Paul is depicted as unattractive.

Nor was Paul a gifted public speaker. We cannot overestimate how highly valued skillful public speaking was in the ancient world. In a world without the printing press (let alone radio, television, or the internet), the way you got your news, the way you formed your opinions, was by hearing people speak. It was perhaps the most highly sought after talent in antiquity, and there was a recognized art to that kind of speaking.

Paul was never concerned about speaking for the sake of impressing others. He ignored the art of it. His goal was to get his message across, whether he entertained or not. But that’s not how it was done in Corinth, so some faction in the church wanted Paul’s influence terminated.

Paul hears of this revolt, and puts in the hands of Titus, one of his assistants, a letter to the Corinthians which scholars refer to as Paul’s “tearful” or “severe” letter. This letter, now lost, would have been written sometime between when Paul wrote 1 and 2 Corinthians, around the year 55 A.D. In that letter Paul lovingly, but forcefully, demands the Corinthians put down this rebellion.

But the whole sordid affair clearly wounded Paul. He loved the people in Corinth, and to be rejected by people whom you love is terribly painful.

Therefore Paul, while writing verses 12-13, recalls one of the most anxious times in his apostolic career. He remembers the time he came to Troas, in what is now modern-day Turkey, to preach, and even though his preaching began to bear fruit Paul found no peace because Titus had not yet returned to tell Paul how the Corinthians responded to his letter.

Paul was dying (I don’t think that’s too strong a word) to hear from Titus. In a hurry to find out the news from Titus, Paul sailed across the Aegean Sea to land in Macedonia, closing the distance between himself and Corinth, in the hopes of catching Titus on his way to meet Paul.

Now, the great digression begins in verse 14 with these words: “But thanks be to God ...” Why, in light of all this anxiety and sadness and disappointment, is Paul thankful to God?

Two reasons, and these will be the two points to my sermon this morning: *first, Paul is thankful because in writing this letter he remembers a reality of the Christian life. Second, Paul is thankful because he remembers what will result from a Christian life.*

First, a reality of the Christian life. Let’s read verse 14a: “But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession ...” That phrase “triumphal procession” might just sound like a rhetorical flourish to our ears but it was actually a technical term in ancient Rome, ***and it’s a critical term if you want to understand a fundamental reality of the Christian life.***

A “triumphal procession” was a parade held in honor of a general after he won a significant victory over one of the Rome’s enemies. But the word “parade” doesn’t do it justice. It wasn’t just any parade. “Triumphs,” as these events were known, happened only rarely, perhaps once every five years, all Rome would turn out for them, and no expense was spared.

The general would notify the Roman Senate of what he and his men had accomplished and ask for permission to have an official triumph. They had to get permission, but if it was granted, they would march to Rome where outside the city all the arrangements would be made.

First in line in a triumph would be the conquering general, dressed as the Roman god Jupiter, riding in a ceremonial chariot covered with gold for the occasion, leading first his family and then his victorious soldiers. Next, others would display the plunder of the campaign, all the items taken from their enemies to be added to the wealth of Rome. ***Then, bringing up the rear, came the defeated army, in chains, mocked by the Romans, being led to their execution.***

I’ve only been to Italy once; I know some of you have been dozens of times. But the one thing I wanted to see was not St. Peter’s, not the Pantheon, not even the Colosseum, but the Arch of Titus. It was built west of the Colosseum, just up the hill, after Titus’ triumph, which he was awarded in A.D. 71 after he and his legions crushed the Jewish rebellion, destroyed the city of Jerusalem, and burned the temple the year before. On the north side of the arch you can see Titus in his chariot, leading the triumph and obviously pleased with himself, and on the south side you can see the plunder the Romans took from the temple. It was exciting for me because I could see all these items I’d read about in the book of Exodus for years: the table for the shewbread, the fire pans for cleaning the ashes out of the altar, and the lampstand with its six branches. It’s a powerful sight.

So that’s what Paul has in mind when he says, “Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession.” But what’s Paul’s point? Why mention that? A lot of pastors and scholars have said the reason Paul referred to the Roman triumphs was to encourage Christians to fight by reminding us that we are soldiers following our victorious king, Jesus. It’s as if Paul’s is saying, “Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war.” Remember that you’re going to win, so fight hard now.

Of course, it is true that Jesus Christ is victorious over his enemies and it’s true that Christians must be ready for the fight, yet that can’t be the point Paul makes here. The Greek word translated as “triumphal procession” is *thriambeuo* [three-am-beh-OO-oh], and in antiquity it never referred to the victorious soldiers in a triumph. It was only used to refer to the slaves bringing up the rear. Paul is not saying Christians are the conquering heroes in a triumph. ***He’s saying we are the conquered slaves.***

Friends, if you’re here this morning and you call yourself a Christian, you must remember what you were before you became a Christian. You were a rebel against God. By your sins you committed treason against your king, and the penalty for treason is death.

It's not like you woke up one morning and decided to do this. You were born a sinner. All we've known is this intense desire to sin: to live for ourselves, to live selfishly, instead of to live for others and serve God. *Indeed, we were slaves to our sin.*

Now if you're a Christian, at some point you realized your slavery to sin, how you want to live differently but you are helpless to do so, and then you met Jesus.

But Jesus didn't talk you into becoming a Christian or entice you or persuade you with high-minded arguments. ***Jesus conquered you and your sins.*** If you're a Christian, you must remember that *you did not enter the kingdom of God by winning victories. You entered the kingdom of God by surrendering!* You had your hands up! You entered by saying, "I have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God. Jesus, have mercy on me!" And he did, but **now we are his slaves, bringing up the rear of his triumphal procession.** As Romans 6:17-18 puts it, "But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, <sup>18</sup> and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness."

And if you're not convinced we should interpret "triumphal procession" that way, then just think with me for a moment: what did Jesus Christ have to do to save us? He had to suffer and die in our place for our sins, bearing the wrath of God we deserve for our disobedience. See, Jesus didn't climb up in a chariot to lead his triumphal procession. Instead, he climbed up on a cross.

Paul turns the idea of a "triumphal procession" on its head. It's the "upside down" triumph. The world says glory comes from crushing your enemies and having your people celebrate you. Christianity says the glory comes from dying for your enemies while they cry, "Crucify him."

Here's what I think Paul was thinking when he began his great digression, and why it's important we get it right. He was reminded of the pain of the betrayal of so many of his friends in Corinth, and he smiled and said, "Thank you, God, for helping me remember that a fundamental reality of being a Christian means we are slaves, and slaves always suffer."

Paul suffered, and friends if you are a Christian you will, too. "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. <sup>13</sup> But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed ... Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name." 1 Peter 4:12-13, 16.

Suffering is a reality of the Christian life. I don't think you can really know you are a Christian until you suffer. But note that 1 Peter 4:16 says, "If anyone suffers ***as a Christian*** ..." You don't have to be a Christian to suffer. There's been lots of suffering in this world borne by people who aren't Christians. How can you know that you suffer *as a Christian*?

You have to be careful here, because I've known some people who thought they were suffering as a Christian who really weren't. Once a man told me that he was the victim of persecution by his closest family members because of his Christian beliefs. He wasn't even on speaking terms with them anymore. But as I later found out what happened was this man was a very angry man,

and each time someone around him did not meet his expectations he would denounce them and their sins. Yet no one could ever, ever talk to him about his anger and his sins. That man did not suffer as a Christian. That man suffered as a jerk.

So how can we know when we suffer as a Christian? I think a good way of expressing it is by saying that in all our relationships we see that our job is to *bear more pain than we inflict*.

Bear more pain than we inflict. Don't you think that's what the best parents do? They don't pay their children back when they are disobedient but carefully, lovingly disciplining them, and then quickly forgetting the wrong done. Don't you think that's what the best spouses do? Not insisting that they get their own way, but instead bearing the pain of disappointment in not getting their way in order to love her husband, his wife? The calling of the Christian life is to go into all the relationships around us, with friends, co-workers, neighbors, and lovers, with the goal of bearing more pain than we inflict.

That may not sound all that ambitious or spiritual but I assure you it is. All the people around you are hurting. Their hearts are broken by their own sin or the sin in the world. But when you refuse to ignore them in their pain or take revenge when they hurt you, and instead willingly suffer to maintain the relationship with them, it honors God and mirrors what Jesus did for us.

“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. <sup>22</sup> He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. <sup>23</sup> When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. <sup>24</sup> He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.” 1 Peter 2:21-24.

Now suffering as a Christian doesn't mean you can't say to someone, “I think you are using me, and we need to talk about this,” or “You realize you have a problem with anger, don't you?” We must have boundaries and we must be honest with people. But it does mean we can't just cut them off when they wrong us. Our goal in every relationship is to bear the brunt of the pain for the sake of loving the other person. Yes, it's hard to bite your tongue. It's hard to turn the other cheek. It's hard to care for hurting people. Yet that kind of suffering is a fundamental reality of the Christian life.

Second, what will result from a Christian life. Paul in our passage says three things will happen when Christians understand and embrace the reality of suffering as they bring up the rear of Christ's triumph. *First, we will become people of sincerity.* That's verse 17: “For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.”

As we said at the beginning, some of the people in Corinth wanted only the best public speakers to minister to their church. And in the ancient world there were plenty of these talented men around; this profession attracted the best and brightest. But these men didn't come to town because they cared about the Corinthians. They only cared about the Corinthians' money. They

spoke because they wanted to get paid. That's why Paul refers to them as "peddlers of God's word."

But Paul didn't care about the Corinthians' money. In fact, Paul refused to take any funds from them at all because they were so hung up on money and what it can buy. He took his support only from other churches. But because Paul was willing to suffer from having less money than he otherwise could have made, the church at Corinth could trust him. All these other public speakers could be counted on to do was to tell the Corinthians what they wanted to hear. But Paul could be counted on to tell them what they needed to hear, whether they liked it or not.

It has gotten so hard to trust what people say anymore. If someone is in a position of leadership in the government, or in business, at the university, or even in athletics, it's very hard to believe what they say because there is so much money at stake. I'm sure these leaders are under tremendous pressure to spin the news and put their organization in the best possible light, to only tweet good news, because if they're honest about the bad news support might drop and funds dry up.

But when you embrace suffering as a Christian, it helps to make you into a sincere person, and sincerity is one of the greatest gifts you can give the world around you. Sincerity means you're willing to take the hits that come with telling people the truth. It is a rare gift to have a friend who knows you, and loves you, and is willing to tell you what they think you need to hear instead of just what they think you want to hear. "Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy." Proverbs 27:6. First, sincerity.

*Second, confidence.* I love verse one of chapter three. These professional public speakers would bring with them letters of reference from other towns as proof of their oratorical skills. Some in Corinth were saying of Paul, "We really should check his credentials before we let him speak to us again." But Paul, just after writing "I refuse to peddle God's word to you," writes, "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you?" You can hear the sarcasm in his tone as he addresses his critics. Then, verse 4: "Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God."

When you embrace the reality of suffering, it gives you confidence, because you find you are not really intimidated by anyone. You're already a slave of Christ. You've already been conquered. Therefore, *what can any man do to you now?*

When you know being a Christian will result in suffering it means that, in the best possible sense, you don't care what anyone thinks about you. You're not a man-pleaser, enslaved to the opinions of others. All that matters is God's opinion of you, and that has been forever secured by Jesus dying for you on the cross. As Paul puts it in his first letter to Corinth, "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself." 1 Corinthians 4:3.

*Third, when you embrace suffering God will cause you to have an impact on others.* Verses 2-3, 5-6: "You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. <sup>3</sup> And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink

but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts ... Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, <sup>6</sup> who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

In spite of all the conflict going on between Paul and the Corinthians, there were some in the church, probably a majority, who had been genuinely transformed by the gospel message Paul brought. God through his Spirit had gotten into their hearts and changed them from the inside out and now Paul tells them, “I don’t need a letter of recommendation for you because your transformed lives are my letters of recommendation, the proof of the validity of my ministry.”

But the impact on others isn’t always what we’d hope for. This is 2 Corinthians 2:14-16a: “But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. <sup>15</sup> For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, <sup>16</sup> to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.”

When the Romans held a triumph, incense was scattered all along the line of the march so that the smell of victory would precede the victors. But Paul says that when Christians embrace suffering their lives are a kind of fragrance that reaches everyone, *but there are no neutral responses to it.*

Now to those whose eyes are being opened to their sins and to God’s mercy in Christ, the smell is a delight. It is the fragrance of life. It’s wonderful and encouraging. But the aroma of Christ is also nauseating to those who don’t believe, because the gospel of Jesus Christ challenges their entire way of life. It calls for repentance of sin. It demands a complete reorientation of their lives away from themselves and their desires and instead toward God and the needs of others.

As Spurgeon put it, “The same sun that melts the wax hardens the clay. And the same gospel which melts some persons to repentance hardens others in their sins.”

Paul finishes verse 16 with these words: “Who is sufficient for these things?” In other words, these are weighty matters, heavy matters. Who is sufficient for them? The implied answer is no one, not even Paul. But God is in control. He is in control of our suffering and he is in control of the results. It is our duty simply to trust him and to be faithful by following Jesus as he leads us in his triumph. AMEN