

**2 Pentecost Sunday
June 6, 2021**

**In the name of God, who in Jesus,
taught us the meaning of unconditional Love.
AMEN**

In both our Epistle and our Gospel today, we are seeing a person reacting to stress.....Yes, even Jesus. And I think these readings may prompt US to consider how WE deal with stress, conflict and criticism, because that is certainly a very real part of our OWN lives. As we continue to read Paul's letters to the young church at Corinth, which we have been doing for awhile now, we sense in today's Epistle, Paul's reactions of strained patience and obvious weariness for the unrelenting criticism of him from the church in Corinth, which HE founded. // And actually, when we move on to consider the Gospel, we are presented with Jesus, under much the same kind of stress, from critics who are prepared to be brutal in exerting pressure.

In today's portion of Paul's letter, his tone is somewhat mixed. We certainly hear determination not to give up his efforts on behalf of this most difficult young Christian community. But, we also hear intimations of weariness and even some tendency to think about death. In this sense, the passage is very human, and it speaks to all of us when we are grappling with difficult tasks or emotions that frustrate us and drive us sometimes almost to despair. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: *"We believe, and so we speak."*

There is a note of sadness here because, once again, Paul feels he has to defend himself against criticism. The critics are suggesting he does not believe what he says! And Paul is contending that he harbors no such division in his heart and mind. He wrote...*"We know that the one who raised Jesus, will also raise us, and will bring us, into his presence."* Paul is appealing to them to realize that both they, and he are in a relationship with Christ that will endure, even after death. They are in this TOGETHER! He entreats them to realize that./// He wrote: *"Everything is for your sake ...to the glory of God"*. Again, Paul is defending himself against painful charges that his work is for self-glorification. And he goes on to say: *"So that we do not lose heart"*. This is a most human moment. We can almost hear the weariness in the words. How often all of us have said something like this at times when we are in fact, sorely tempted to lose heart. As we continue on in Paul's letter, we begin to wonder if Paul is indeed losing heart. He speaks of his outer nature wasting away, while his inner nature is being renewed. In the Greek culture of his time, these terms were very commonly used for body and soul...the "inner nature" and the "outer nature." Although Paul speaks of some slight affliction, we cannot help feeling that he is heavily burdened, and discouraged, especially when he refers to death. He says: *"We know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God...eternal in the heavens."*

What Paul wrote has made me think of an old story told about John Quincy Adams, one of the Founding Fathers of the United States of America. It seems that on his eightieth birthday, John Quincy Adams was walking slowly along a Boston street, when a friend came alongside him and asked, "How is John Quincy Adams today?" The former president replied graciously, "Thank you. John Quincy Adams is well sir, quite well. I thank you. But, the house in which he lives at present is becoming dilapidated. Time and the seasons have nearly destroyed it. Its roof is pretty well worn out, and it trembles with every wind. The old place is becoming nearly uninhabitable, and I think John Quincy Adams will have to move out of it soon. // But, he himself is quite well sir, quite well."

I do think that was the attitude Paul had. Even as his physical world was so challenging, inwardly he knew, as a beautiful Gospel hymn says: "It is well with my soul. It is well; it is well with my soul." That is the attitude Paul is so intently trying to convey and that WE need to cultivate, so that when the time comes for us to leave all that we know, to fold our tents, so to speak, we can say with St. Paul, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." That Paul came through such difficult times and moods; that he came through his dark woods- should be immensely encouraging to us who have our own trials of one kind or another that WE must face. Christian faith does not guarantee that we can avoid the dark times of life, but it does offer grace and resources to us when we must go through them. //////////////

Well, let's leave St. Paul now and see what we can learn from today's Gospel. At this peak point in our Lord's ministry, the crowds were very large, especially in his home area of Galilee. But, he, and others, had long known that the authorities in Jerusalem would soon notice what was happening. In such a volatile and nervous society, ALL growing movements were suspect. The Roman authorities, under Pilate's command, were nervous because Pilate had been given strict instructions to Keep the Peace. The Jewish authorities were nervous in turn, because Roman disciplinary action could be sudden and brutal. All this helps explain the phrase in the Gospel that says, "*there was the presence of the scribes who came from Jerusalem.*" We can be certain that it was a tense time, as there were many unfamiliar faces on the edges of the local crowds, and considerable attention and critical awareness as these outsiders listened to this rabbi named Jesus, whose words were drawing more and more people.

A measure of the frantic state of things is that Jesus can now find no privacy. Members of his family are alarmed and so concerned for him and want to try to get him to just lie low. We read, "His family...went out to restrain him." Even beyond the family there is concern for Jesus. Some are even wondering if he has gone out of his mind. Yes, out of his mind to have such lack of caution in the face of danger. This is perhaps even more troubling to them than the actual words he is saying, the message he is giving. Well, we know, the scribes and other strangers in this crowd do not remain silent. It is in their interest to goad Jesus into saying things that could be used against him. Someone shouts, "He has Beelzebul... By the ruler of the demons he casts out demons."

This particular slur is so enraging. If we listen carefully to the extended reply that Jesus gives to this charge, we can hear him becoming more and more forceful. He starts by trying to reason with them: He says, "*How can Satan cast out Satan?*" And then he hurls the dreadful charge that: "*Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness.*" Mark takes care to tell us why Jesus said this: He writes: "For they had said, he has an unclean spirit." He is saying that these people were so misguided that they were prepared to dismiss the very actions obviously intended for healing...as unworthy and even evil. How maddening!! And Jesus expressed that such blatant cynicism in the face of such a gift was beyond forgiveness.

At this point, the rest of Jesus' family arrives, even his mother. This certainly tells us that they are worried about him; worried for his safety. A crowd separates Mary from her son. She sends him a message and waits, only to hear his voice across the crowd saying, "*Who are my mother and my brothers?/// Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.*"

I have always felt that, while this statement rings true spiritually and that doing the will of God is something we are called to strive for, still...for the mother of Jesus it had to be deeply hurtful. We cannot know the

full circumstances of this moment, the thoughts in Jesus' mind as he said this, or the tone of voice he had. We cannot know if he deeply regretted saying it, as we know all too well how we can deeply regret having said something.....But, it is probably safe to assume that he later showed care and love to his mother when there was a chance to explain what he meant. I think we surely can find ourselves in this scenario! Oh the complexities of family relationships and the constant striving to keep everything on an even keel with all our relationships, both among family members and beyond - in our friendships, our work relationships, our community relationships. /////Well, for me, I have to say that after staying with these words from Jesus for awhile, I feel certain that Jesus was not denying his own family, but rather, he wanted to transcend the narrow meaning of family and, more than that, he wanted to encourage us all to treat all our fellow human beings as mothers, sisters and brothers in the family of God.

So...what do we have after this effort to understand more deeply, the messages of Paul and Jesus in our Scripture readings today?

I suppose, on a simplistic level, we have two amazing leaders, who could never have imagined the forever impact their words, their actions, their lives, would have ...from then until now.... forever!

On a very deep, profound level, what we have conveyed to us is the Gift of God's Love for us... we who are precious in his sight, we who are created in His image, we who are called Children of God...WE have the Blessed Assurance that nothing... ever can separate us from the Love of God, made known to us through our Lord Jesus Christ, by the Power of the Holy Spirit./////

One of the struggles of faith lies in the difference between the world we see and live in, and the ever unfolding prayed for the Kingdom of God. In the portion of today's letter to the young church in Corinth, Paul cautions that the people on the journey to know God's Kingdom, walk with a different perspective, QUOTE "because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen." UNQUOTE. One of the messages here might be that we do not have to look elsewhere for God at work. Instead, we might look differently at what is already around us!! What cannot be seen is like what is written between the lines of a text: It may be invisible, but the meaning is no less clear. Perhaps Jesus wants us to look around us with the eyes of the heart instead of with our worldly eyes. We may not always perceive Divine grace, redemption and love -- but our hearts can know it! As we walk and work through our daily lives in the coming week, let's try to open wide the eyes of our hearts, so to speak. Perhaps we will suddenly see ways in which Jesus' life-affirming resurrection and the Spirit's love-filled breath are already hard at work around us...and indeed...within us. Perhaps we might even be inspired to join in. //// Perhaps in our hearts we may sing, something like..." Breathe on me, Breath of God. Fill me with life anew. That I may love the way you love, and do what you would do."

AMEN