

Lift Each Other Up
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
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Psalm 138, 2 Corinthians 4:13–5:1

Paul gives us much to think about, in the Second letter to the Corinthians. Lots of metaphor, and some great one-liners, top-ten hits if-you-will, like *"we are ambassadors for Christ,"* and *"if anyone is in Christ, they are new creation."* He gives us metaphors of tents, houses, clothing and so much more. In today's reading, he is continuing with the theme he initiated earlier in the letter, talking about reconciliation.

This is because (you may remember), Paul is not in a good place with the Corinthians, at this new church he started. All of these other wandering disciples have been coming through, challenging his authority. His last visit to Corinth was painful and awkward, and he's decided that it was so bad, he'll never go and see them again.

The people have begun to lose their trust in him, and he's just done.

And yet, in the midst of all this conflict, he's using his energy to try and impress upon them that what is really important is the stuff in life that we can't see. Things like love, kindness, forgiveness, patience and more.

We know that life for Paul and others of his time wasn't easy. Time was usually not on their side, with an average life span of 35¹, there were no guarantees. In his life as a follower of Christ, Paul himself was no stranger to pain, suffering, prison, and ultimately, death.

It takes a lot for someone to look around at the painful part of their world and say, *"ah yes, I know this is our present reality. This is what we see, what we have to deal with, but it's not the whole of what's going on here."*

Paul believes, as a person who knows something about pain firsthand, that though everything the eye can see looks to be to the contrary, God is STILL on the move. God is up to nothing less than making things right. Why would Paul write this? Why does he even care?

¹ <https://earlychurchhistory.org/daily-life/longevity-in-the-ancient-world/>

Well, Paul says it himself: so that they don't lose heart. So that we don't lose heart. In the midst of a life that is completely uncertain, Paul says, we must trust — even in the middle of all that we do not know — that God is working to make good, even when we can't see it.

So that we don't lose heart. So that we keep hope alive.

Paul isn't giving them false, empty platitudes like that which we might read on a Hallmark card, that things will just be fine so stop worrying!

Nor is he telling them to just give up, because nothing's going to ever change anyway.

Paul dwells in the in-between, the already and not yet. Amidst uncertainty, he encourages them to trust, to not live their lives dictated by the terrible things that surround them. To keep striving.

"Christ urges us on," Paul writes, trusting that God is there, working within us and outside of us for good. We must live, trusting this, having faith in this, Paul says, so that we don't lose heart.

It helps for me to think of faith as a mix of trust and hope, with a lot of God's help added back in.

As Clark and I were becoming therapeutic foster parents about 6 years back, we approached our training with a ton of (what feels now like) Pollyanna hope. We sat in a dismal classroom at the Department of Child & Family services once evening a week, for a year, trying to soak up all we could about what the future might hold.

I believed that if I could just read enough books on child development, I'd be really good at it. So we learned about Adverse Child Experiences, and attachment theory, and positive behavior reinforcement... and we tried (in theory, since this was before any of our placements) to correct the parenting missteps made earlier with our oldest two children.

But it's only recently that I've been able to admit to myself that I could read EVERY book there is out there and attend every parenting seminar that is offered and there will still be days that I will fail and fall flat on my face.

During this growth process, I've learned that it's a lot easier to stuff my brain with knowing things than it is to do the hard work of trusting in the long game. This is my growing edge. What is yours?

Hope is another thing altogether. And I want to talk about that for a moment. Because I've come to understand that real hope is dealing with uncertainty.

We can't be certain that everything will get better. In fact, the reality is that much of it won't, and there's always some *'learning to deal with it'* that we will be engaged in.

But the flip side is, we can't be certain nothing will get better. Some of it, indeed, with patience, love and humor will! We may not see it, or notice it in real time, but by God's grace there will be days when many things go right.

Real hope is being willing to live in uncertainty – where you are not at the highest peak, nor are you in the lowest valley. To live with uncertainty is to also be in possibility. Hope means another world just might be possible. Not promised, not guaranteed. But possible. And I like those odds.

In order to dwell in possibility, to have hope, to be able to change the world for the better, we will live in uncertainty. Uncertainty is where Paul is dwelling too. Not denying the pain and sadness, but not thinking that's all there is to it, either.

We hear Paul naming the truth. "We groan," he writes, under the weight of it. There is plenty of uncertainty going around in the world today. But there is also reason to hope. Because the groaning that we hear, with God's midwifery, is bringing about something new.

As Paul would say, *"we walk by faith, not by sight"*. In this community, you and I are called to help lift one another in that. So together we hope, we trust, we pray and act for what we do not yet see, because within what is uncertain is what is possible.

What could be.

A new way of being.

A new world.

A new life.

Let us live into those possibilities, lifting one another up, doing what we can, trusting that God walks with us. And may we not lose heart! Amen.