

## “Gratitude and Not Losing Heart”

Nov 20, 2016

2 Cor. 4

We do not lose heart. We do not give up. We do not get discouraged. These statements might be a little strong for you in the midst of our nation’s upheaval. Or maybe this describes where you’re at...seeing this as a mantra for your life circumstances or the nation’s. Most likely we are somewhere in between these two sentiments.

We do not lose heart is a phrase that Paul uses 2x in this chapter of 2 Corinthians. And it’s more descriptive than prescriptive in its context. It is describing how Paul and those working with him are not about to give up on the ministry they started just because there is some opposition or physical afflictions or nay-sayers.

At this time in Corinth, there were other missionaries who were strong and full of vigor, flashy words and rousing speeches. And they were sowing seeds of doubt in the believers there in Corinth. Doubts about Paul and his leaders. Things like, Paul doesn’t have the right credentials. The right recommendation letters. His team wasn’t the real deal. Paul was suffering physically and was weak. Maybe not strong enough for the job of apostle. Doubts about Paul’s message that Jesus was the Messiah for the Jews AND Gentiles. Or his preaching on humility, suffering, and grace.

Doubts that were seeping into the church in Corinth. And so Paul writes this letter...possibly his third and fourth letter to this group of believers. As it appears there was at least one letter in-between 1 and 2 Corinthians.

And one of his primary points is to assure the church in Corinth that he and those with him were legit. That the ministry they began there in Corinth was authentic. And the suffering he and others were experiencing did not invalidate that, but rather validated that they were doing the ministry God was calling for.

The antagonism, troubles, and huge stumbling blocks he and his team had experienced did not mean they were throwing in the towel. Nope. This ministry was not theirs, but powered by God. Like a treasure in fragile clay jars.

<sup>7</sup> But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us...always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.

We do not lose heart, describes their resolve to continue in this ministry.

I believe those words can be descriptive of us as well.

Even as anxiety and fear rise over what a Trump presidency will do to our country and mean for many who are already marginalized and discriminated against in society.

Even as despair seeps into our own lives because of jobs, lack of jobs, finances, health, depression, relationships, or family complications.

Even if in the midst of feeling raging mad, or extremely alone, or fragile, tattered and worn out.

Even in the midst of the hatred and venom in our country,

We too can, not lose heart.

We, like Paul, can be resolved to live out our ministry, in spite of opposition, hatred, despair, or affliction. Our call as followers of Jesus, is not powered on our own, or created from our sheer will. This is God's ministry, infused with power way beyond our own but one that works through our very bodies, minds, and souls.

Reviving and restoring us so that we can be reconcilers,

Living out the love of Jesus in our actions, words, and inner being.

Caring for our neighbors, our enemies, ourselves, and those on the margins.

Resisting and calling out the powers of hatred, destruction, division.

Reflecting God's light, which shines through our own fragile clay pots

But let me be clear, to not lose heart, doesn't mean adapting to a new world based on values that counter the message of Jesus. Based on racism, exclusion, and bigotry. It means having the courage to non-violently resist such a world becoming the new normal.

To not lose heart is to find courage and hope, not to say things are fine or that whatever we face will just melt away. But courage and hope to see God in the midst of all the chaos, fear, and struggle.

Practicing gratitude enables us to do that. To notice the beauty and goodness that God continues to sustain in the world. Gratitude helps us view life differently. It helps us to not lose heart.

For me, gratitude is different than saying thank you or the term thankfulness even though they are so closely related. Thankfulness seems more of an action in a time and place, remembering to say thank you for the birthday gift or the kind note someone sent you. Or noticing when prayers are answered or catastrophes are averted and giving thanks. This is all certainly needed. But there's more.

Thankfulness is part of gratitude. But gratitude is bigger than thankfulness. It's more like a way of life. A way of viewing my surroundings, my life, the world that invites me to see God's beauty all around me. Even in the times of struggle.

Gratitude is noticing the things that are gifts, not necessarily answered prayers. It's the small or large things of beauty, goodness, and love in our days. Things as simple as the warmth of holding a cup of coffee, the way the sun comes in the window and falls on the countertop, the moon rising over the housetops, the feel of my cat or dog curled up beside me. All these can go unnoticed and seem inconsequential. Yet all of these are gifts that speak to my soul. That remind me God is creating goodness and beauty all around me, if I but stop to notice.

This doesn't just come all at once, this seeing beauty in spite of the pain. But it is a practice that eventually begins to change us.

The practice of gratitude includes noticing, naming what we noticed, and pausing to thank God. A simple few words will do. It's not about the elaborateness of the thanks. It's about seeing the gift, pausing, and thanking.

Gratitude also is not about always feeling thankful, or happy, or that these things we notice take away our struggles. But rather that in the practice of noticing, naming, and thanking, we open ourselves up to God's love. The love that heals, restores, and revives us. It's like letting rays of light seep into our soul. Into the pain, fear, and despair.

Dee Dee Risher, who was our speaker at Women's Retreat this year, talks about gratitude as looking for the shafts of light no matter what the circumstance. She reminded us that gratitude is not about being thankful for the affliction or heartache. But rather about finding God's shafts of light, seeping through the tiniest of gaps, in the middle of affliction, pain, and heartache.

In her book, *The Soulmaking Room*, she names gratitude as a cultivated habit that "lowered the volume of my brain, opened my eyes, and made me confront my own life. It shoved aside my fears and anxieties about the future and made room for the beauty of the present...in many ways, it brought me back to life or, rather, it brought life back to me." (195)

Bringing us back to life.

Bringing life back to us.

Gratitude helps us heal. Helps us see things differently. Helps us not lose heart.

It's not like this practice is easy when we haven't been used to noticing God's surprise gifts. Yet, it's not elaborate either. Just takes making it a habit.

By noticing the things that bring life, the power of the resurrection, gratitude becomes a way of practicing resistance to the opposing powers of despair, or of hatred, or of destruction.

By naming beauty, goodness, and grace, gratitude helps to resist the powers working against the love of Jesus. It helps us focus on the power of Christ's resurrection still here today. The power of renewal, of grace, love, and life.

The power that works to bring life out of death, despair, evil, hatred, revenge, greed, jealousy, pride.

Practicing gratitude helps us to have faith that God is still God, creating beauty, goodness, and hope.

It enables us to not lose heart. Giving us courage to continue being followers of Jesus. To step out and continue our ministry of

Caring for our neighbors, our enemies, ourselves, and those on the margins.

Resisting and calling out the powers of hatred, destruction, and division.

Living out the love of Jesus in our actions, words, and inner being.

Reflecting God's light, which shines through our own fragile clay pots

For we are afflicted, but not crushed;  
perplexed, but not driven to despair;  
persecuted, but not forsaken;  
struck down, but not destroyed.

Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.  
We do not lose heart.

May that continue to be descriptive of us. Amen.

~ Lorie Hershey

## **2 Corinthians 4:1-2, 6-10, 16 (NRSV)**

Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. <sup>2</sup>We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.

<sup>6</sup>For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of [shadows]," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

<sup>7</sup>But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. <sup>8</sup>We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup>persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup>always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

<sup>16</sup>So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.