

“Passing Through the Storm”
June 20, 2021
Scripture: 2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41

For a lot of people Paul’s letters come across as sort of egocentric. This part of 2nd Corinthians is a good example why. Not only does he sound very judge-y of the community, shaming them repeatedly, but he just sounds full of himself. Is he really the only example of faith they should look to for guidance? I understand how it can seem that way. And maybe in life Paul really was kind of insufferable, but I really think his motives are sincere and he genuinely wanted to help the people in the communities he founded to embrace new life in Christ fully no matter what the cost.

And Paul understood there is a cost. We don’t know exactly what his opponents were saying about his version of the gospel or what their alternative was, but it appears they pointed to the hardships Paul went through because of what he taught as evidence that he had it wrong. They seem to have been promoting a kind of risk-free version of the gospel that would protect its followers from harm and be socially acceptable. The hardships Paul lists—afflictions, calamities, beatings, imprisonments—meant he was on the wrong path. There’s a version of that gospel today called the “prosperity gospel.” It claims that God’s blessing can be observed through material gains. People with strong faith will do well financially and socially, but weak faith leads to difficulties.

Paul isn’t buying it. He won’t play their game. Instead of apologizing for the storms he’s been through, he boasts of them. Instead of seeing such difficulties as challenges to his faith, he says they make his faith stronger by forcing him to be more reliant on God. His weaknesses are evidence of God’s strength. Paul isn’t about to downplay the consequences of preaching a gospel of love in a world that has no use for it, that resists it at every turn. He’s convinced the gospel of Christ is worth the hardships he’s gone through and he refuses to compromise his message of love to make his life easier.

Passing through the storm is unavoidable for people committed to following Jesus. This little story in Mark’s gospel can seem like a throw-away, it’s so brief and simple, but it reveals a truth at the heart of Jesus’ teaching. When Jesus tells his disciples to go to the other side, they begin crossing more than the Sea of Galilee. On the other side was the Gentile world, a hostile culture and one that Jesus’ followers would have considered beyond redemption. Jesus’ message of inclusion and unconditional love meant seeing others, even hostile foreigners, in a completely different light. But making the journey from the way they’d been raised to see the Gentile world to Jesus’ understanding meant passing through stormy waters. There would be consequences for them if they stayed with him, storms ahead they could hardly imagine.

That’s what happens whenever we follow the gospel of love. I think of Clarence Jordan who with his wife Florence and American Baptist missionaries Martin and Mabel England, in

1942 established Koinonia Farm, an inter-racial community in the heart of Jim Crow Georgia. Their intent was to model a community rooted in Jesus' teachings, honoring every person and rejecting all forms of violence. Jordan once said, "Even though people about us choose the path of hate and violence and warfare and greed and prejudice, we who are Christ's body must throw off these poisons and let love permeate and cleanse every tissue and cell. Nor are we to allow ourselves to be easily discouraged when love is not obviously successful or pleasant. Love never quits, even when an enemy has hit you on the right cheek and you have turned the other, and he's also hit that." In other words, the path of love will always put us in the storm because the world will always resist it.

And it's the world's resistance that's the evidence we're on the right path, contrary to the claims of Paul's opponents. What Jesus teaches his followers, where he takes us on the sea of this journey inevitably leads us into conflict with a world obsessed with power and control, security and order. It's been distressing, for instance, these last several years to see how many countries in eastern Europe are willing to give up democratic freedoms for authoritarianism. Russia, Belarus, Hungary, all of them have allowed their fledgling democracies to wither, choosing order rooted in prejudice over the messiness of democracy. But it's even more distressing to see how quickly folks in our own country seem willing to do that. The gospel message of love and inclusion rejects systems that exclude people because of their lack of documentation or their economic status, their skin color or gender identity. And when we promote that gospel with "patience, kindness, holiness of spirit and genuine love," we enter the storm.

Standing firm with Jesus means passing through the storm he endures. We're called to follow him, to take up our cross alongside him and risk whatever we must to reveal the love and hope he's given us. That means we have work to do. And even though we'll face a storm of resistance to the love we bring the world, we live in the peace of knowing Christ is with us and we have nothing to fear. Friends, I invite you to embrace that peace, the peace that sustained Paul in his journeys and conflicts, the peace that fell over the water when Jesus spoke, the peace that will sustain us at every step as we proclaim Jesus' gospel of love.

Amen