

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

Over the years, business marketers have learned that all they have to do to sell something to the American public is to associate it to the "heart." For example, there are lots of food labels that proclaim themselves to be "heart healthy" or "heart smart"—a label that usually means the food is lower in cholesterol and saturated fats, which are substances suspected of contributing to heart disease.

The use of heart sells other things as well. Chevrolet has claimed to be the "heartbeat" of America. The state of Ohio attracts tourists by advertising itself as "the heart of it all." Bumper stickers declare everything from "I [heart=love] my Rescue Dog" to "I [heart=love] riding my Harley."

Why are we so heart-focused? Heart disease continues to be the great killer among well-fed, stressed-out, exercise-free Americans. It's what took my dad. But since we now know that we can reduce our vulnerability to heart attack by eating right and exercising, why do so many still live in fear of their heart? There is a lot more than clogged arteries and leaky valves endangering our hearts. We are suffering from a form of "heartsickness" that has nothing to do with cholesterol and triglycerides.

As Paul wrote to the various struggling Christian communities he cared about so deeply, he urged them time and again not to "lose heart." Persecuted by Jews, ridiculed by pagans, often misunderstood by other new believers themselves, Paul refused to "lose heart." It seems the worse things got around Paul, the more reasons he found to "take heart" instead of letting his heart sink. In 2 Corinthians 4:8-9, Paul admits to having felt "afflicted," "perplexed," "persecuted" and "struck down"—yet the apostle's heart remains intact, even enthusiastic.

What sorts of things cause us to "lose heart" today? Few of us ever face the kind of harsh persecution Paul and other first-century Christians experienced, yet our spirits sag and drag about as if our life and faith were overbearing burdens.

Fear is one of the biggest culprits that causes us to lose heart today. Some of us fear the world we live in—crime is everywhere. How can we feel safe when children are roaming the streets armed with guns and looking for trouble? Fear robs us of any sense of security and control in our lives. When our hearts can't even feel safe at home, our spirits get sick. Chaos seems to be in control of our society. All our high-tech security systems, electronic bugs and beepers don't seem to be able deter violence. So, we slowly lose heart.

After 9/11, many people feared that the terror was not over, so they focused on the externals around them which only served to intensify their fears and left some people feeling paranoid. I remember taking our dog outside and noticing how quiet it was. If you remember, after 9/11 planes were not allowed to fly. Planes always fly over our current house. There is a small airport right in Westminster where we live, so small planes usually fly overhead before landing. And the Baltimore airport is only 30 miles away, so there are always planes in the sky, which we can see but not always hear. But those few days after 9/11, it was eerily quiet, and the skies were absent of planes and jets. It intensified our fear.

Fueling all our real and imagined fears is a lack of trust. Not only are we afraid of armed intruders, but we can also be equally afraid of and suspicious of those we call our friends. Sometimes, it feels hard to really trust anyone. We assume people show interest in us only because they want something from us. Our society is definitely "user-friendly"—a society, where those who learn how to use and manipulate the right people get away with it and get ahead.

In the old days, a popular business saying was, "It's not what you know, it's who you know?" But these days, people are so much more information-oriented than people-oriented that the new alleged wisdom teaches, *"It's not who you know, it's what you know about who you know!"* It's hard to trust, to share your heart, your hopes, your dreams, your fears, your love with someone you suspect is keeping a file on you. You cannot give your heart to someone you cannot trust.

We also "lose heart" because we lack confidence in ourselves, our abilities, our worth. As we get older many of us experience physical limitations, which can strip us of our confidence and feelings of self-worth. Also, we feel so small and insignificant compared to the global problems and the worldwide crises that we see and hear on the news each day. Our sense of purpose and desire to do something is lost with "I-think-I-can't/I-think-I-can't" thinking. Without confidence to encourage and boost our heart, it falls flat.

Paul knew the kinds of fears and disappointments, rejections and defeats his early Christian brothers and sisters were facing. He knew from personal experience the kind of heart disease that could develop from a steady diet of persecution, betrayal, and failure. When Paul counsels his fellow Christians in his letters not to "lose heart," he does so knowing that he has found the perfect defense against heart "dis-ease," and that is faith in Jesus Christ.

The most common way we lose heart is by focusing on the externals, the "outer nature" as Paul calls it, of our lives. If Paul had trusted in the physical, the worldly, the fleeting things in life, he too would have lost heart. Instead, the apostle experienced his world on two levels at one time—the outer world and the inner world. The outer world was the place of conflict and despair, persecution, and pain. Paul had to live in this outer-world—where suffering and deprivation are real, and we must live there also.

Paul could take heart, in spite of the externals in his life—all the ridicule he had to bear, the prison sentences he had to serve, the beatings he had to endure, the foolish, selfish Christians he had to put up with because he knew none of these could harm his inner nature. The inner nature in Paul was Christ himself. Growing in Christ for Paul involved a process—a process of nurturing and growing a deep spiritual faith—that continued throughout a Christian's whole life, a process not complete until the whole "inner nature" is filled with Christ.

Paul could not lose heart because at the center of his being, there was Christ. No matter what kind of fears assaulted, or doubts attacked him in the outer world, the Christ within was "renewed day by day" and grew ever stronger. In a way, Paul identified his "momentary afflictions"—meaning trials, negative influences, afflictions of the outside world— somewhat of a conditioning gym for him. Although forced to be present in this gym, it helped to build him up in preparation for the "eternal weight of glory beyond all measure."

This means for us that, although our current trials and troubles are disruptive and painful, Paul reminds us that our ultimate hope lies in what we know is to come in another lifetime. We know that there is life after death, and in that place that is yet to be our home, we will live forever with God, and it will be a place without sin and suffering. Knowing this, really believing this, cultivating this belief as we work to strengthen our faith in Jesus Christ can help us live above the pain and worry that we face in this life.

So, we should not lose heart because with Christ in us we are built-up by our "momentary afflictions." In every instance when the world tells us it is time to give up, throw in the towel, forget it, lose heart, the spirit of Christ alive in us tells us—no, more than tells us, the Spirit takes hold of us and gives us the ability to take heart.

In 1949, a man by the name of John Currier was sentenced to life in prison. Currier could not read or write. He was later transferred from prison and paroled to work for a wealthy farmer. In 1968, Currier's sentence ended. The records of the Department of Corrections show that a letter was written to the convict and to the farmer informing them that the sentence had been satisfied, but Currier never saw the letter or knew that it existed. A year went by, then two, five, and finally 10. By this time, the farmer had died, but Currier kept working, serving out his sentence on an allowance of \$5 per week, living in a dilapidated trailer with a horse trough for a bath and a garden hose for a shower stall.

Not until the 1980s, did a state parole officer learn of Currier's plight and tell him of the missing letter. Currier lost more than 10 years of his life because he failed to get the message that he had been freed.

How many of us are losing years of our life to despair and worry because we haven't heard, "You are freed!" You are free! Jesus sets us free! Don't hold on to your suffering. It is not your security—Jesus is. Don't succumb to the lies you've been fed about bad things that happen in your life because you are not good enough, usually meaning you're not living up to the world's standards. You belong to God—not the world! Don't lose heart because you see so many bad things happening around you and around the world. Instead, look for God and the good that God is doing in the world. God is good! God is alive in our world even though the evil in the world tries to hide God.

Do not lose heart because, as Paul wrote, "Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." Amen.