

We Do Not Lose Heart...
Homecoming Sermon for Lindsley Avenue Church
October 14, 2007
McGarvey Ice

Text: *2 Corinthians 4.1 : ...since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart....* [NASB]

Trouble in the Biblical Text

SIGH Look at what we are up against! Division, personal enemies and opponents of our ministry who would discredit our ministry and distort our teaching. Deep-seated racism and class-hatred in the church, false and misleading teaching on a host of issues, envy and sectarianism, blatant immorality, a crisis of leadership. Why, our worship assemblies sometimes look more like chaotic gatherings to the gods of wine and love than moments of divine grace before the Lord of Life. Our city is on the one hand famous for its cosmopolitan character and on the other hand notorious for its lack of moral character. SIGH, look at what we are up against!

I wonder what it must have been like to be one of Paul's associates during the years he labored and corresponded with the Christians at Corinth. Sosthenes, Timothy and Titus, along with others, shared ministry with Paul and had a part in the writing and delivering of letters (not to mention personal visits) to and from Corinth. Paul's ministry in Corinth, and the time he spent in contact with the church there spanned a number of years and a number of letters. What we know is that the church was situated in one of the more important trade centers of the Mediterranean theater. It was truly cosmopolitan and offered the best of Greek and Roman culture. At the same time it offered the worst of idolatry, immorality and competing stories by which life could be lived. Into this circumstance Paul and others declare the good news of God: that Jesus Christ was crucified and buried and is now raised from the dead. Into this situation Paul and others

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declare that the way of Jesus is the story by which we live. And yet, the church at Corinth is a congregation divided. Personalities, false doctrine, class, ethnic and racial identities, sin, would woo the church from the foundation laid for them in Christ. No wonder we could easily imagine Paul letting out a deep and painful sigh as he receives the latest news or correspondence from his beloved Corinth.

Trouble in the Present Day

One-hundred fifty years ago Cherry Street Christian Church in downtown Nashville was hailed by many as the finest church in the city. It certainly had the finest building, and her minister, Jesse Babcock Ferguson, was praised as the best preacher in the South. But the church was troubled. A few years into his ministry, Ferguson has clearly and openly espoused Universalism and Spiritualism and the peace of the congregation was deeply upset. In fact, when Alexander Campbell himself paid a visit to the Nashville church to assist them, Ferguson left the city, claiming that the ghost of William Ellery Channing had warned him not to meet Campbell. At one time the church was strong, with many capable workers teaching and ministering. But in the late 1850's the church was broken. In the midst of what we now call the "Ferguson Affair" David Lipscomb began preaching in the suburbs of the growing city. He preached in East Nashville, North Nashville, and here, in South Nashville. After the civil war, as the city was reconstructing itself, this area of town was the intellectual center of Nashville. The ^{and in Athens} universities were here, a good deal of wealth was here. ^{this area = Athens of the South} But between this hill and downtown was a slum known as Black Bottom. In the years before the Cumberland River was controlled by dams, that low area would flood and the rich black silt from the river gave the area its name. It was, by all accounts, one of the worst places in Nashville,

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and its was just down the hill from where we sit this morning. This area of town offered the best and the worst of one of the key cities in the South during Reconstruction. And this area of town would be the place where David Lipscomb would devote the remainder of his life as Elder of the South College Street Christian Church. His first audience in the 1850's was three ladies and little boy. By 1877, 130 years ago, the little band was able to purchase a corner lot a block from here. A decade later in 1887 they were able to build a building and the congregation grew. As they grew they faced grievous obstacles and grand opportunities. Life in the church in Nashville was in some ways similar to that in Corinth. There was division; there were competing stories that vied for a place in the hearts of Christians. Racism, class-hatred and sectarianism were constant issues. I suspect that David Lipscomb, T. B. Larimore, James A. Harding, J. C. Martin, W. H. Timmons and others could echo Paul's deep sigh for the church.

Grace in the Biblical Text

Deep as that sigh might have been, Paul was convinced that division, personal enemies, doctrinal upheaval, and immorality would not have the final say as to the hope of the church. For Paul had declared to the Corinthians that the one who established them ~~in~~ in Christ and who anointed and who sealed them, and who gave to them the Holy Spirit as a pledge is none other than God himself. Furthermore, Paul declares, as many as are the promises of God, they are YES in Christ Jesus. Paul's ministry in Corinth is not based upon nor is it rooted in his own personality, his own ethnicity, his own social status, or his own teaching. Paul's ministry is rooted in the gracious act of God in Christ. His ministry from first to last is Christ, indeed, ~~to sum it up~~, as God's promise to us in Christ is YES, so our response and our ministry is AMEN (2 Cor. 1.19-22).

Wm. - a 1920 - Lindsay Ave.

*however hopeful
however fearful*

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Into troubled Corinth, with all of its promise and all of its peril, Paul declares that God's gracious promise to us in Christ is YES. Paul will go on to say that his adequacy comes not from himself, but from God (2 Cor. 3.5). For Paul there is something that stands beyond the troubles of the moment that roots and grounds ministry: ^{that} the grace of ^{something is the} God and the mercy of God and the ministry of God. How else could he be hopeful for Corinth? How else could he be so confident as to declare the gospel in that city? How else could he deal so boldly yet patiently and lovingly and tenderly with the church in Corinth? How could he except for the prior work of God? How could he but for the mercy of God and the ministry with which God had blessed him?

Grace in the Present Day

2 Cor. 4.1: "Since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart..." David Lipscomb comments concerning this verse that "as God had committed to him so great a trust, he would not be discouraged or disheartened by the great persecution he endured." J. W. Shepherd adds that "there was nothing so deep down in his soul, nothing so constantly in his thoughts, as this great experience. No flood of emotion, no pressure of trial, no necessity of conflict, ever drove him from his moorings here. The mercy of God underlay his whole being."

How else could David Lipscomb, T. B. Larimore, James A. Harding and others declare the gospel in Nashville in the 1850's, or in 1887, or how can we declare it today given the circumstances we face? How can David Lipscomb dare to plant a congregation when the best and brightest his church had to offer turned out to be a shame to the brotherhood across the South? How can he be so confident as to plant a congregation

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between his city's intellectual center and her most squalid slum? How could he but for the mercy of God and the ministry with which God charged him?

How can we venture forth with the good news? When we look around our city we would could very well sigh and shake our heads and say look at what we are up against. Look at how we are afflicted! Look at how we are perplexed! Look at how we are persecuted! Look at how we are struck down! Look at what we are up against!

Henri J. M. Nouwen says this, "Our lives are full of brokenness. Broken dreams, broken relationships, broken promises. How can we live with that brokenness except by returning again and again to God's faithful presence in our lives?"

to Corinth and to us
Paul says, "We do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

How can we lay down our lives in such brokenness? We can, since we have this ministry. We can, because we have received mercy. We can because of what God in Christ has done for us and is doing through us for our city. Because of God's faithful presence in our lives, we do not lose heart. Amen.