

Now Is the Time
2 Corinthians 6:1-13
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There is an urgency in this reading from *2 Corinthians* today. Paul wants to get the attention of his hearers. He quotes the prophet Isaiah regarding God's intention to act and then tells the church at Corinth the time for God's intervention in the world is *now*. Now is the acceptable time. Now is the day of salvation. Now is the Kairos moment when we are called to respond to our maker, wholly and with everything we've got. The word for time in this passage is Kairos, not *chronos*. This is no ordinary season. This is a holy invasion. It is the appointed hour, the favorable, proper time for us to recognize that God is doing a new thing and we are to embrace it with open hearts, hands and minds, with the entirety of our lives and to the marrow of our bones.

In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God held nothing back from us and we are to respond in kind, holding nothing back from God. Hence, Paul details all he has endured for the sake of the gospel: afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, sleepless nights, labors and hunger. And yet, through it all he rejoices. The only thing that matters to Paul is following his Savior, regardless of the cost.

And frankly, sometimes I envy Paul's singular, unrelenting focus. He is so clear on his call, his purpose, his goal, that nothing dissuades him. His ability to will one thing, to give himself over fully to the preaching and teaching of the gospel, enables him to be rich even when he possesses nothing, to be fearless in the face of every threat, to be confident in the power of God no matter what he must endure.

As painful as these verses sound, there is within them an underlying beat of the freedom to be found in Christ that I wish I could embrace like Paul does. I've not sold all I have, given the proceeds to the poor and headed off with nothing, in order to preach the gospel. I live in beautiful neighborhood, in a lovely house, surrounded by many nice things with no immediate plans to give this up. I've not headed off to some far away place or been persecuted on account of my faith. I find myself asking when I read this passage: what I have risked for the sake of Jesus Christ? And that makes me wonder about what this litany of afflictions, hardships, and calamities means for me, and for disciples like me.

What are we to do with Paul's words that are now part of God's living Word and God's Word to us? Feel guilty? Seek out faith-based calamities? Rationalize that our context is very different from Paul's and therefore the Lord requires different things of us? Fall back on that prevalent, yet heretical, doctrine of the spirituality of the church that contends that only the eternal state of our soul matters, ignoring that the incarnation reveals, in Will Willimon's words, that "...*God has chosen to be in the world in the midst of people.*" (*The Gospel for the Person*

Who Has Everything, page 114) What are we to do if now really is the time, the day of salvation, a Kairos moment in which the Spirit is moving, and God is intervening? How are we to follow the divine infiltrations of our time, no less than Paul did in his?

I wrestle with these questions regularly and maybe that's where we should start, acknowledging, that in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, when Christ calls a man, Jesus bids him come and die and then attempt to be open to what that dying and rising with Christ looks like *now*, in our Kairos moment of history. Maybe we begin with the truth that Will Willimon articulates in his book, "*The Gospel for the Person Who Has Everything*" that:

The church demands things of people. It challenges the popular notion that we human beings are helpless and powerless sheep who have nothing to do with our common destiny. The church will tell you every time it asks you to offer yourself and your gifts, to sing and pray, to listen and act that you have responsibility. In spite of all our efforts to evade responsibility for our world and other people...the church lifts up our oneness with humanity under the love of one God. (page 111)

God has chosen to be in the world in the midst of people and while we might not be imprisoned for our faith, beaten or treated as imposters, our commitment to Jesus Christ ought to be outwardly evident, obvious, and tangible in the world that God so loves. It demands things of us and if we find that our faith isn't costing us anything than perhaps *now* is the time to ask God for the wisdom and courage to be the salt and light we are commanded to be.

Willimon quotes T.S. Elliot:

Why should men love the Church? Why should they love her laws? She tells them of Life and Death, and of all that they would forget. She is tender where they would be hard, and hard where they like to be soft. She tells them of Evil and Sin, and other unpleasant facts.

In other words, Willimon says, "The church asks people to grow."

And therein is another challenge found in this passage. Paul tells us, in light of all that God has done for us we are to grow, we are to widen our hearts. Maybe this is the hardest admonishment in all of Scripture. Maybe this is the command that we resist the most. We are called upon to greatly expand our loves, enlarge the circle of our concern until it encompasses all of creation, live our unity in Christ daily and in ways that make us hurt and rejoice with each other and with our siblings all over the globe. We are called to be vulnerable and open to the point that we are so connected with others that we are willing, maybe even eager, to look to their interests as if they were our own, to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Now is the time, the acceptable, proper, Kairos moment in what I hope are the waning days of this pandemic *chronos*, to ask God to widen our hearts, break them open, and expand our affections in ways that will stretch us, re-make us and set us free. Now is the time to pray in earnest for a singular focus on the One who died that we might live, defeating all that would conspire to separate us from God and each other. Now is the time to grow, to mature in faith, to wrestle with what discipleship demands of us so that we can say with Paul, our hearts are wide open, there are no restrictions in our affections, we will not accept the grace of God in vain.

I've been reading the powerful writings of Kiese (*Key-essay*) Laymon. His words expand my heart and at times break it open. In his essay, "We Will Never Ever Know" he includes a

letter his aunt wrote to her deceased brother, Laymon's uncle, who died unexpectedly after a tumultuous and at times tragic life. She writes:

The heart is the true measure of a man or woman. Your work is finished but your worth is still being revealed. Your life was not in vain, Jimmy. You made a difference. You helped our mother find the strength and the courage to fight another day and your words inspired her to change her life. I think that is the true measure of our worth and why God put us on the earth. Have we made life better for others by lending a hand, a heart, a word, a song, hope for despair—and always, always shared the gift of love? We may be broken, but God knows how to mend broken hearts and spirits. I have been better by knowing you, brother, and I thank you for the lessons along the way.

I am not Paul. Neither are you. But all of us are called to make a difference, to make life better for others, to always, always share the gift of love. My faith has not brought on calamities or hardships, but it might yet, and maybe if I widen my heart enough, I will rejoice even if it does. Now is the time to ask God to help us grow, to expand exponentially the circle of our concern, to let go of any restrictions on our affections, so that we will embody Christ's love in our Kairos moment, refusing to accept the grace of God in vain, but instead extending it to others in all circumstances, because God's goodness knows no bounds, and therefore we have all we need and then some.