

It happens when we get sick, during a long illness, or a terminal illness, when a diagnosis just can't be found. It happens when a child or a parent or a dear friend is ill, when a beloved neighbor dies, at the anniversaries of the death of our loved ones. It happens to the couple who loses a child to miscarriage, to the couple who endures the monthly pain of infertility, to the mother who waits at the window for the son who is "missing in action." It happens to the young boy who is raped by a choir director, the neighbor attacked on his way home from work, the wife whose husband is murdered. It happens to the student who works hard and doesn't get into medical school and to the partner who loses the one job that was supporting their family. When such things happen in our lives, especially when they involve tragedy or violence or long suffering, we are prone to lose heart.

In today's second lesson, from II Corinthians, Paul speaks of the great faith he and his coworker Timothy have in the promises of God, the faith that keeps them from losing heart. "We do not lose heart," he writes, in spite of the difficult circumstances in which he and Timothy frequently found themselves. Listen to his list of woes: imprisonment, flogging, stoning, shipwreck; danger from rivers, bandits, Jews, Gentiles, and false followers of Jesus; danger in the city and in the wilderness; hunger, thirst, cold, naked, anxiety. In spite of all these challenges, he says, "We do not lose heart." In last week's lesson, just prior to this week's, we heard him say, "We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed." No matter happens, says Paul, "We do not lose heart." Other translations of this text read: "We never become discouraged." Or we could paraphrase: "We never feel like giving up." "We never run out of energy to keep going." "We refuse to be daunted by anything that comes our way."

I confess that there are times when I come very close to losing heart. These days, almost every time I listen to the news, for example. The suffering we are witnessing—in Ukraine, in Palestine, in Israel, in Sudan, in Yemen. The violence between community members and police or domestic violence, in families. The political rhetoric from the right and the left, demonizing the other side. When I hear about these things, day after day, I'm dangerously close to losing heart. When I work with congregations of our conference, in Orange and Sullivan and Rockland counties, when five out of our eleven congregations can't pay even a half-time pastor, when councils struggle to find members to serve, when only eight people show up for worship and the youngest is 72, when I'm still thousands of dollars below salary guidelines, I can come dangerously close to losing heart. When I brush up against the rifts among my siblings or realize that I might not see my grandchildren this summer, I'm close to losing heart.

Even when we are faithful, when we encounter difficult circumstances, we tend to lose heart. Why, then is Paul so insistent upon saying, "We do not lose heart"? Perhaps Paul's word "therefore" offers the key. "Therefore" is a conjunction, a connecting word that indicates that something just said impacts what is said next. It alerts us that the conclusion offered after it comes out of the reason stated before it.

For example, "It rained; therefore, the clothes on the clothesline got wet." OR "I studied hard; therefore, I passed the test." "Therefore" clues us to look back to find the reason for whatever

happened. In today's lesson, what comes before the "therefore"? Why doesn't Paul lose heart? What has he just finished saying before the "therefore"? In vs. 14, which we read last week, he says, "We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus."

Why we don't lose heart is not that what's happening to us is not really that bad or that we're super-Christians unmoved by earthly suffering, but, rather, that, no matter what happens to us, God will also raise us with Jesus. Even when the very worst thing happens to us, when we face our own death, we know that the God who raised Jesus will also raise us. When we encounter tragedy or endure suffering or just have a crappy day—or a crappy weekend—or a crappy month, whenever we would be perfectly justified in losing heart, Paul invites us to remember that, in the end, at the last day, it is God—and not illness or death or war or violence—that will have the last word. Then we can realize that our troubles are, as Paul says in today's lesson, "slight and momentary"—and that God's grace outweighs them all.

In my first year of ministry in Toledo, I went to a meeting with other people who were working in our neighborhood that was full of people living in poverty. These workers were trying to address the systemic issues of poverty: hunger, homelessness, and woefully inadequate housing (No new housing had been built for 80 years, and the rental rate was 85%!). And more: lack of education, lack of transportation, lack of child-care, addiction, and lots of trauma. At that meeting, James, a social worker who'd been working in the neighborhood for decades, said something I've never forgotten: "We're in this for the long haul."

So many times those words have come back to me when I've felt discouraged or depressed or defeated. We're not in the "business" of being the church for instantaneous results, but for the long haul. While we may not see any results, we may trust that the Holy Spirit is working, over the years, in the hearts of those whose lives we touch. And as we are in the "business" of being the church for the long haul, we're also in the church for an even longer haul, beyond our lifetimes, even into eternity.

That's why we do not lose heart, not because we're pretending that everything is ok or because we're so good at dealing with suffering, but because we know that, in the end, God who raised the Lord Jesus will also raise us with him and that, on that day, our "slight, momentary afflictions," as Paul calls them, will no longer have power to hurt us. So whenever you are in danger of losing heart, remember: "We're in this for the longer haul"—today, tomorrow, and forever! AMEN