

“SLIGHT MOMENTARY AFFLICTION”

PSALM 138, MARK 3:20-35
2 CORINTHIANS 4:5-13-5:1

MARKET SQUARE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN
HARRISBURG, PENNSYLVANIA

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As a relatively new mother, I am learning that what many of you all told me is true. Or maybe I'm learning it in a new way or seeing the truth of it with fresh eyes. As soon as Cora was born, you said, "Enjoy this time. It passes so quickly." You also offered, "She will change so fast. As soon as you get used to something or think you have figured it out, it will change." By the way, that does not sound comforting to a new mother.

But ya'll were right! Both sentiments are deeply true. A child changes so quickly, sometimes overnight. Their rapid development makes each moment seem so fleeting. Cora was a nearly helpless infant just a year and a half ago. Today she is saying short sentences, directing us, and expressing her desires, tastes, and displeasure clearly and sometimes loudly.

Each developmental stage, each new wonder, and each challenge is temporary. Around eight months she began these sweet fluttery hand movements. She was using her arms and hands to grasp items, but these movements seemed unconscious as she sat happily in her highchair. A few months later, almost without us noticing it, the fluttering gestures gave way to precise and intentional hand and finger movements.

Some nights I wondered if I would ever sleep again. She fought it and would not go down without a long battle, countless lullabies, and relentless rocking. At times I thought I would be done in by the lack of sleep. The nights felt so very long. It was hard to remember in those sleep deprived moments that this was temporary, a slight momentary affliction. And now, we lay her in the crib still awake and she plays, talks, and soothes herself to sleep. This, I recognize, may change again and soon enough. Remember, as soon as you think you have it figured out, it will change! It is all so fleeting, all so temporary.

What we see now is not the full truth or the full reality of who Cora is or is becoming. She is always unfolding as she leaves each stage behind and moves into another with the joys and challenges it brings to those of us who love her.

I think Paul would say we put too much stock in what we see. We give too much credit to appearances. We love physical beauty and admire and want to emulate those we deem beautiful. We love the look of success - the right clothing, home, car, career, and attitude. Sometimes consciously and unconsciously, we change our behavior, clothing, attitudes, and even voice in order to appear more desirable, worthy, or put-together to others.

I was recently reading about a growing trend in women's voices called vocal fry. It is when a person drops his or her voice to the lowest natural register, which changes the way a person's vocal folds vibrate together. It has the effect of making the voice sound creaky or choppy. It is becoming increasingly popular even though research suggests many people react negatively to the sound of the vocal fry. But there are a lot of celebrities, including Kim Kardashian, who employ this vocal technique and we are hearing it more and more in both women and men. It is striking to me that we place so much value on appearances that we go so far as to change the sound of our voice.

Paul, however, gives little credence to appearances. Take his life for example. He claims to be afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down. He describes himself as wasting away. His outer nature, the part of him that can be seen, may look as if it is failing. But to the contrary, Paul states that he is being renewed day by day. He suggests that his inner nature contains the real truth and that is what we ought to take seriously. The truth of his life and his ministry is in what cannot be seen. The fact that he is afflicted, persecuted and wasting away is of no account for in his mind, this is a slight momentary affliction and nothing in comparison to the eternal truth that cannot be seen.

So, what is the truth for Paul? It is this, "Because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence.....so grace as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God."

For Paul, it is all about God's grace, which is a freely given unmerited gift from God. A life transformed by this grace should and does generate thanksgiving to God. In Paul's mind, the goal of human life, the goal of a life defined by God's grace, is to glorify God.

This is incredibly counter-cultural, as is his disregard for outer appearances. This means that the goal of our lives is not to seek happiness or fulfillment. It is not to do good or to be a good person. It is not to follow our dreams. It is not to build a successful business, even non-profit, or church. It is not to make your own way in the world or to heal all your wounds. It is to glorify God. Everything else flows from this response to grace.

If the goal of our lives is to glorify God for the grace we have and continue to receive, then in time we will find that we know more than happiness, we know joy. We learn that fulfillment is not in what we do or do not do, but in who we are in relationship to God. We discover that we do what is good and right because we seek to live a life ordered by God's radical love and resist that which tears down, alienates, or wounds God's people. If we first and foremost glorify God, we will likely become more compassionate and driven to love those whom God loves. We will also find that it is not up to us alone to make our way and that healing and wholeness comes not from our own doing but from God's grace and work within us and the community around us.

This also frees us from the pressure to succeed because any appearance of success is just that - an appearance and it is temporary and fleeting.

I often find that I am overwhelmed by the concerns and needs of the world. If I choose any one issue or topic - say migrant families torn apart at the border, climate change, poverty in Harrisburg, or the plight of dogs and puppies in puppy mills, I can easily find myself overcome with emotion and unable to act. I do not know where to start. I cannot imagine how my efforts would make a dent in the issue. Anything I can or might do does not seem to matter or alleviate the heartache and destruction I see in the world. But the goal of my life is not to reverse immigration policy, to save the planet from global warming, or to rescue every dog from a puppy mill. If I were up to me alone, well, I could do nothing.

The reality is that my call is to glorify God and in so doing to allow my inner nature to be renewed day by day. In other words, this is a life-long ongoing process. My call is to allow God to transform me and mold me and send me out. It is to gather in a community of other individuals who understand that the goal of their life is to first and foremost praise God and then through our devotion to God, we will be and are sent into the world to offer hope and peace.

It is also important to remember that all of this is temporary and changing. God has the final word. The reality that matters is the one we cannot yet fully see. Yes, the outer nature may be wasting away, but the inner nature, the reality of God and God's love for us and the world is eternal.

It is easy for us to become despondent as we see the need in the world, if we fail to remember that this is all temporary. That is not to say that it does not matter or that the pain caused by inhumane policies, abuse of our planet and the creatures that live upon it, or the disregard for the poor is acceptable or should go on unchallenged. It is to say that we must trust in what we cannot see (which is God's grace at work) so that we do not despair or find ourselves done in by the affliction, pain, suffering, and persecution we experience or witness.

At times it feels as if we and our world are wasting away, as if our work and our words are failing, but if we remember our goal is to glorify God, not to appear on the outside as a great success, we are able to do the work to which we are called trusting that God is renewing us, others, and all creation in ways we cannot yet know or see.

God's grace and love is eternal. It is not momentary or fleeting. It will have the final say. So, our life's goal is and always will be to glorify this eternal God, trusting that God will use us in surprising ways to heal, offer peace, and comfort to a world awash in God's grace but often too blind to see it.

So we believe, so let us live.

Amen.