

Disappointments

Grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ...

It says in John 3:16, *“For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have Eternal Life”...*

I think those words are some of the most beautiful words in the Bible – because they sum up the Good News – or what some call the Gospel – but (depending on where a person may be in their life) I’ve also learned from my experience in ministry that they can also be the most difficult words for some people to hear (and for some people to believe)...

Many years ago when I was a student in Chicago I spent a year doing field work at a church that I grew to love... it was a church that was going through a transition from being old and in decline (into becoming a church that truly wanted to grow and do God’s work in the community)...

And the pastor had done a very good job at welcoming new members and reaching out to the community... in fact, in the time that I was with that congregation there were numerous *new* faces joining the church and there was a sense of excitement in the air (it was a vibrant church)... it was the sort of place that when you left you felt good (not only about God) but also about yourself...

But rather than focusing only on the new members – the pastor was also trying to reach out to former members as well (who for one reason or another stopped coming to the church before she had arrived)... and I don’t remember her name but in our attempt at locating former members of the church we stumbled upon a woman (who I’ll call Kathy) who, at one point, had been quite active in the church - but had evidently stopped coming... and so we decided to walk to her house to find out what was going on...

Now Kathy was probably in her early fifties (and was also extremely friendly and welcoming)... she invited us into her house and she went on to tell us why she stopped coming to church... and the story that she told was heartbreaking... it started with losing her job, then her teenage daughter had gotten into some trouble at school and was threatening to quit, her husband had died that same year ... and then to top it all off – she had a small fire in the kitchen (if I remember correctly) that she had no money to repair (and that finally pushed her over the edge)... she just couldn’t catch a break...

And I'll always remember what she said... she said something like, "*And I guess I left the church because I had so many bad things happening to me all at once that I was having a very hard time believing in God's love... and it wasn't personal against the church – but I just sort of stopped believing... believing in God's love for me... and so here I am!*"...

You know, that happens in life sometimes, doesn't it?... You want to believe that '*God so loved the world*' but when your whole life seems to be falling apart, when the road you're faithfully walking on becomes completely unmanageable, and at every corner you turn there's another problem waiting for you – I think there's a natural tendency in all of us to question what God might be up to... and if things get really bad (we might even question whether or not God loves us at all)...

And I know they say that '*God doesn't give us more than we can handle*' – but I don't remember ever hearing those words come from the lips of someone who finds themselves in the midst of a crisis – or a tragedy – or a depression... and for someone like Kathy (the truth was that in her mind *she had been given* more than she could handle – and it not only affected her ability to believe in a loving god – but it also *nearly drove her* to a nervous breakdown)...

You know, in our first reading this morning from the Book of Numbers we read another very interesting story about God's Children (being given more than they believed that they could handle)... and the story we just read relates to their journey - as they make their way from wearing chains as slaves in Egypt – into the Promised Land...

And if you know the story of their journey (you also know that it was not an easy road to walk)... it was hot, it was long and winding, it was extremely difficult to *navigate through* by foot (or with children in tow) – and what's worse, everything that they had grown accustomed to in Egypt (had been taken from them)... and now they found themselves dirty, dusty, and desperate...

And I know the Bible seems to blame them for complaining (but some of us who are here today can remember the challenges we all faced after Super Storm Sandy)... many of us were also completely uprooted from our own homes (we were forced to walk through the wilderness of uncertainty – made to learn the meaning of patience and humility – and although each person had a different experience (there was nothing comfortable about that time in our lives))...

and I think (like it is today with this Pandemic) if someone complained (just as God’s Children complained or questioned Him on their way back to the Promised Land) I think we can all understand why... because it was a scary time... and like it has been today for so many – it was very difficult emotionally and mentally to navigate through...

But this week (as I was wrestling with this text) – I was thinking that maybe the story in the Book of Numbers is not meant to teach us how to complain (or to question God’s love for us) even though that does happen when someone’s life falls apart... but maybe it’s those difficult roads that we sometimes walk (and maybe it’s the challenges in life – and the disappointments - and the heartache – like so many are experiencing today) that are really meant to bring us closer to God... to rely more heavily on His love than we ever thought we’d have to...

and that rather than rely on our own strength, and our own wisdom, and our own sheer determination – that perhaps what God’s Word is reminding us (is that’s where faith comes in)... that’s when we need to lean on the Lord even more (like many have been learning to do today with this Pandemic)...

I mean, the Israelites thought that God had abandoned them in the wilderness (and from what we read – they were ready to turn around and go back to being slaves in Egypt – or to quit walking altogether) – why? – Because they thought they knew better than God... and they thought that God had them on a fool’s errand... and what’s worse – they couldn’t believe in God’s love for them///

But had they held onto their faith – a faith that believes in God’s love no matter what - (and not allowed themselves to get lost along the way) every one of them would have made it into the Promised Land – which was where God wanted them to be (and eventually be able to witness) that God had never abandoned them (but had been right there with them all along) trying to get them into a place (they would have *never gotten to* on their own)...

And we know that every generation has that same struggle (of trusting in God’s love when life becomes difficult – like it has been for many today)... which is why St. Paul wrote these words to the church of Ephesus – *“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – and not the result of works, so that no one may boast”* ...

And what St. Paul is saying (is the same thing that I am saying to you this morning) is that having faith is believing that God does for us (what we can't do for ourselves)... and that His love never leaves us...

and sometimes it doesn't always look that way (or seem that way) or even make sense – the same way looking at a snake on a pole probably made no sense to the Israelites who were wandering in the wilderness place... but what God was telling the Israelites and He tells us – just keep walking (and I will get you there)...

(and the promise in the end is that we will see that *'all things work for good - for those that love the Lord'*)... and that's where we put our faith (when we, too, find ourselves walking on an uncertain road - *that God would have us walk*)... and always trusting in His love...

You know, just as the pastor and I were leaving Kathy's house on that day – she refused to give up encouraging Kathy to keep walking the path that leads to the Lord... and said, *"Why don't you try coming back to church this Sunday... there's some new people I'd like to introduce you to (and who knows?) maybe you'll begin to see God's love again"*...

And I don't remember if she returned to the church right away (but what I can tell you is that when she did return – she found a group of people who were ready to show her the love and support that she needed...

and although the church didn't do that to make all of her problems go away – instead, we were hoping that in the end what she would realize – is what I want you to remember today - (that even when the darkness comes – God's Light does not go out)... and that she was *as loved by Him in her heartache* (the same way she was loved by the Lord - *in her joy!*)...

and let me tell you something thing as well – that same message is true for you today... yes, you may be walking in a wilderness place as we speak – but keep on walking in faith (because ultimately, the Bible tells us, it will lead us into the heart of God)... keep on walking... because in the end (we walk together) and the Lord walks with us...

"For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have Eternal Life" ...

In Jesus' name we pray...

Amen!