

"beyond all measure"
Reading from the New Testament: 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

I was horrified, horrified, I tell you, to discover that I'm not running nearly as fast as I used to run. Sometimes, you know, technology can be quite insulting. I've never used a Fitbit, Garmin, Polar, Suunto, or Apple watch. I've always just measured my distance according to an estimation of time and pace, but recently, allured by the idea of actually seeing the map and mileage of a run, I broke down and purchased the cheapest GPS watch on the market. I'm thinking it may have been manufactured by Fischer-Price. Anyway, I charged it up and set out for my morning run, not knowing the insult that would follow.

I felt the watch buzz, informing me that I had indeed completed a mile, but that I was running at a pace almost a minute slower than I was ready to give myself credit for. I thought, "How dare you!" - as if the watch could feel shame for insulting my pride. Needless to say, the rest of the run was sheer misery as I fruitlessly tried to prove the watch wrong. "I know I'm running faster than this. I know I'm running faster than this." I was not. So, these days I'm back wearing an old school

Timex stopwatch because who wants to have their exhaustion multiplied by guilt at the end of a run.

"Even though our outer nature is wasting away..." The GPS was blunt in its assertion that I was wasting away without ever having been to Margaritaville. I'm aging. No reason to be surprised by that. In spite of societal pressure to deny it, our vanity will not forestall it. Aging, like some other things, happens. It's not a design flaw. It's the template from which all life is drawn. It is not an accident that some days I feel like a fossil, and it is not tragic to know that someday I will be one. Paul is candid, but not morose, about the vicissitudes of life when he writes in Romans of "our bondage to decay," and speaks of "this slight momentary affliction" here in 2 Corinthians. He's just being honest.

Life has limits; unnegotiable parameters; the show has a limited run; the tour always comes to an end. That's not morbid. It's just the truth. The grass withers, the flower fades. "Surely the people are grass," says the prophet, Isaiah. Yet, it is not the intention of the prophet or the apostle to dishearten us. Their aim is quite the opposite. They want us to understand that until we find peace with our mortality, we will not be able to live fully.

"So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure..." In this chapter, Paul is affirming the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and through Christ, the promise of eternal life. Paul says, "the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will bring us with you into his presence." Yet, this is not an invitation to diminish or malign the days we have on this earth. He is not encouraging us to just sit back and watch YouTube as we wait for that train to glory to enter our station. Rather, Paul states this promise to assure us of the future beyond death so that we may live fully for today, unbound by this world's obsession with the myth of immortality and the denial of physical obsolescence.

Think of all the energy we expend, the worry we purchase, and the money we lavish to pretend that we are immune to aging. "Our product is guaranteed to reverse the course of aging." No, no, it isn't. Sorry Ponce! That fountain of youth is as real as Sasquatch and the products that promise it are as reliable and true as a Main Street at Disney. Oh, you can inject it, paint it, stretch it, dress it, color it, lift it, cover it,

exercise it, medicate it, diet it, and massage it, but you cannot make it immortal. "All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field," says the Lord. The world tells us that the goal of life is to live longer. Paul is telling us the goal of life is to live fully, fully in the sense of with meaning, purpose, generosity, love, mercy, community, peace. If we spend all our effort and energy denying life's limits and decrying life's irritations, we completely miss life's possibilities.

Paul says, "So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal."

Paul is setting up a contrast here between the ways of the world and the ways of God's kingdom, not primarily in terms of now and then, but more in terms of here and there. Yes, there is a now and then component to it. We do look forward to that time of glad reunion in the kingdom of God. Yet, what Paul intimates here is that what we value about that future time can transform our approach to and appreciation

of our limited time here and now. Think about it, what is it that we anticipate and value about the kingdom of God? The cessation of pain, the evaporation of anxiety, the alleviation of suffering, the reconciliation of relationship, the elimination of conflict, the joy of fellowship. John of Patmos expressed it so well: "the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more."

What Paul is saying is that if these are the things we value, the environment to which we aspire, that changes the way we approach the present. Knowing what we value about the future transforms the manner in which we live into it. Put it this way, if you're registered for a marathon, what you do between registration and race day alters, not only your experience of the race, but also your health and well-being as you prepare for it.

When you wake in the morning, you may have a long list of things you need to get done. You may write it all down with the hope of checking off tasks as done by end of day. But in preparing your list, do you take time to consider the attitude/mindset/spirit with which you

will approach those tasks? What are the values you will reflect? The ways of the world or the values of God's kingdom? No matter the task, will you seek to alleviate the suffering of those you meet? Will you represent the mercy that fosters reconciliation? Will you be fully present to those you encounter or will your obsession with your image and appetite get in the way? Will you build up or tear down? Your time here is limited. How will you use it?

When I'm running, obviously slower than I think I am, I will pass pairs or small groups of folks out walking or jogging, catching just the edge of their conversations. I may not hear the exact content of their dialogue or monologue, but you know, you can discern a lot of what they are saying just in the tone of their voices. And I am amazed at how often the tone of the voices tells me that someone, not present with them, is getting trashed, being criticized, is the subject of their righteous indignation, does not meet their standards. It's a beautiful day, the sun is shining, there's a cool breeze and they are filling these precious moments in a foul mood of resentment and vitriol because someone, something, some event, some encounter has not met their

expectations or has wounded their ego and their image has been potentially besmirched.

Seriously! We only have so much time. Is that how we want to use it? Think about how often our moods and impulses prevent us from participating in the very things we value about the kingdom of God - to alleviate suffering, to be fully present in our encounters with others, to pursue reconciliation, to ennoble others, to embody the mercy of Christ. Our daily diatribes may be cathartic, but they are most often not constructive. All flesh is grass. Our time is limited. How will we spend it? Do our lives reflect the values we claim?

Our time is limited. We may be wasting away, but our whole being is renewed as we live into what we value in that future kingdom instead of acquiescing to the ways and values of this world.

Now, I know our graduates, who we honor today, may be asking, "Okay, old man, we can see you are wasting away, but what does that have to do with us?" My answer – everything. I can understand the question, I mean, you are opening all sorts of envelopes these days stuffed with messages like: You have the whole world in front of you;

You can be anything you want to be; Relish this time of your life! That's fine. There is nothing wrong with that. But your time is not unlimited. The longer that you treat your days as disposable, tossed to and fro by whims and trends and impulses and moods and image keeping, the fewer days you have to create purpose and meaning and value. When was the last time you had a conversation, to which you were fully present and engaged, not about the latest gossip or your present irritation, but about a subject infused with meaning and purpose, zeroed in on what is going on in the world and how you can live in this world in ways that will leave it better than you found it; ways that alleviate suffering; ways that build up communities and people; ways that enrich the dignity of others?

If we inhabit the opinion that we'll get to all that later, we probably never will, and the sentence of life does have a period. What will you do with the precious time you have?

You see, I was running last week on the National Mall in Washington D.C. Slowly, of course, I was running by the reflecting pool that lies before the Lincoln Memorial. Have you visited there? It is a hallowed, awe-inspiring place, the utter dignity of his statue rendering

you self-conscious and quiet. On one side chamber are etched the words of the Gettysburg Address and on the other side chamber you find the words of his second inaugural address, two speeches that stand among the most profound words spoken in the course of human history. "It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion." "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds." Eloquent. Theologically astute. Compelling.

So, I'm running toward that monument and those words and that calling when I pass this young couple down by the reflecting pool, standing at its edge. These would be folks self-identified as *beautiful people*, perhaps even self-proclaimed social influencers, and it was time for a photo. The woman, focused on getting her long, lustrous hair to drape perfectly, was wearing a floor-length, golden cutaway maxi dress. It's a thing. And placating her inner Angelina Jolie, she extended her leg out of the cutaway so that the sun could highlight the bronze and

toned limb set against the crystal gleam of the water. Granted, Washington may be the world capital of photo ops, but this wasn't about making memories, this was about self-absorption and self-promotion. This was wholly superficial in a place that calls for depth and reflection. "Look at me! I hope you like looking at me as much as I like looking at me." It all seemed so ironic when viewed in such proximity to words that call to us: "to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan--to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations."

We live in a world of wanna-be influencers, whose influence adds nothing to the common good, nothing to alleviate suffering, nothing to promote peace, nothing to model the value of self-giving love. Our time here is precious and finite. What shall we do with it? If our ultimate hope is that time when conflict disappears, suffering is ended, the tears are wiped from all eyes, and we are dwelling in the presence of God, why wouldn't we want now to be all about those very things that reflect such a place? The world tells you to chase your dreams. The church challenges you to pursue the dream God has for you. That's where your greatest joy will be discovered.

So, let us not lose heart. "Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure." Amen.