

**2 Corinthians 1:1-11**  
**June 7, 2015**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**  
**Pastor Steven Nicoletti**

We are looking at the first section of 2 Corinthians this morning. This is a letter that Paul wrote to the church that was in Corinth and the surrounding area of Achaia. It is probably one of Paul's most intimate and open letters. It is also a letter written shortly after Paul had gone through some intense persecution and some intense personal suffering.

With that in mind, let's turn to our text, 2 Corinthians 1:1-11:

<sup>1</sup>Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,  
To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia:

<sup>2</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>3</sup>Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, <sup>4</sup>who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. <sup>5</sup>For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. <sup>6</sup>If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. <sup>7</sup>Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

<sup>8</sup>For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. <sup>9</sup>Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. <sup>10</sup>He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. <sup>11</sup>You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.

This is God's word.

I want to start this morning by asking: How do you respond to suffering? To physical suffering to some extent, but to a greater extent, how do you respond to mental and emotional suffering? To heart-level, or gut-level suffering? To mental and emotional pain that can lead to despair? How do you respond when that kind of suffering comes knocking on your door?

As a whole, I think we are part of a culture here in America that almost frantically tries to flee from suffering. In fact, we often work hard to avoid even mild discomfort.

You can see this in a trend that has picked up of identifying what people call "first world problems." People make memes and other jokes – on the internet and in real life – pointing out our tendency to complain about even mild discomfort in our otherwise comfortable and blessed lives. Some people post memes with these kind of complaints on the internet – usually accompanied with a picture of someone crying, as a joke. And you can find complaints like this:

“One pillow is too low. But two pillows are two high.”

“I want to lie on my side while texting, but my smart phone keeps rotating the screen.”

“I have nothing to drink at home, except for a virtually unlimited supply of clean water.”

You get the idea? They poke fun at how many of us – and I know I am guilty of this – complain about and work to avoid even mild discomforts or frustrations in life.

But there are more serious expressions of this tendency as well. One is the story of Brittany Maynard.

Brittany was 29 and had been married for just a year when she was diagnosed with an aggressive form of brain cancer. She was soon given a prognosis of only six months to live.

When it was clear that no cure was available to her, Brittany decided to move, with her family, to Oregon, where it was legal for her to request a lethal dose of medication from a doctor, to end her own life.

Brittany’s story soon got media attention. In her open letter she wrote on CNN.com she discussed both the physical suffering she would face if she let the cancer run its course, and the mental and emotional suffering it would cause her, her husband, and her mother.

In one video Brittany explained, saying, “I refuse to lose my dignity. I refuse to subject myself and my family to purposeless, prolonged pain and suffering at the hands of an incurable disease.” She went on to say, “I want to live fully until I die.” She then explained how much peace she was given by having control over her death. Throughout the video, she emphasized her desire to die, as she put it, “with dignity.”

In another video Brittany focused on the mental and emotional pain and suffering her disease had caused her so far. She also expressed her concern about the suffering her illness and death would cause her mother and her husband.

On November 1, 2014 Brittany died, with her family around her, after she had taken a lethal dose of medication.

It is complicated to know how exactly to respond to Brittany’s story. As Christians we hold that it is not our right as individuals to end a human life – including our own. And so it is understandable and right that many Christians were distressed by Brittany’s choice, and concerned about how the publicity of it could influence others to make a similar decision.

At the same time, it strikes me that primary in our response to Brittany should be compassionate pity. Brittany’s situation was a difficult one. I know it is harder than anything I have faced. And her sad and terrible choice to end her life was not as autonomous as she had hoped. She was not just an advocate for doctor-assisted suicide, but she had been disciplined by our culture in a particular way of viewing life, death, and suffering that led her to that unfortunate decision.

All the same, I bring Brittany Maynard up not to talk about her death, but to talk about one of the underlying assumptions that led her to take that lethal dose on November 1.

Brittany explained that she refused to subject herself and her family to what she called “purposeless, prolonged pain and suffering.” As much as she talked about the physical pain of the disease, more often her focus was on the mental and emotional pain it would cause. She talked about losing autonomy, as if to live without autonomy was less than really living. She talked about losing her dignity – implying that to live with suffering she could not control was to live without dignity. She talked about wanting to live fully up until her death – implying that to live with suffering was to be less fully alive. She spoke of her desire to take control of her situation.

I bring Brittany Maynard up because I think we are all a bit like Brittany Maynard. Now, of course I do not mean that we all face the same dire situation she did. I also do not mean that in that situation we would all make the same choice that she made. What I mean is that in our functional, day-to-day lives, we often have the same assumptions about suffering as she did, especially mental and emotional suffering.

We often see mental and emotional suffering as purposeless. We often see emotional pain as an insult to our dignity. We see heart-level suffering as something that prevents us from living fully. And if it leads us to need to rely on others, we often see suffering as a threat to our autonomy, and that terrifies us too.

And so while we might never request a lethal dose of medication if we were in Brittany’s situation, in our own, less dire situations, we too flee from suffering and try to seize control of our situation.

What does it look like when we do that? When we flee from mental and emotional pain? It can take a range of forms.

Sometimes we try to anesthetize ourselves from the pain. It may be through ways that we “zone out” – that we disconnect from the world. We might do that through large doses of television or video games or the internet.

It could be by pursuing distractions – whether immersing ourselves in work or in a hobby. Or it could be by some sort of substance abuse or some sort of sin. Alcohol. Overeating. Drugs. Gossip. Pornography.

How are you tempted to anesthetize yourself when confronted with heart-level suffering? With mental and emotional pain?

But that is not the only way we might flee from suffering and try to seize control of our situation. Other times, rather than looking to an anesthetic, we turn to a form of emotional stoicism. We convince ourselves that the mature thing to do is to feel nothing, and that we can do it by our own will power. We fight to banish the mental and emotional pain from our being. If the

anesthetic route tries to drown out the pain, the stoic route denies it is even there. We can even be tempted to elevate this kind of stoicism to a sort of virtue.

But when we pursue either of these options – the numbing or the denial – we are a lot like Brittany Maynard, grasping for control, banishing the mental and emotional suffering because we have decided it is purposeless. Or if it has a purpose, we are sure that it is certainly not worth the price.

What is interesting is that Paul is dealing with similar assumptions with the Corinthians. And when confronted with those assumptions, Paul begins his letter here by acknowledging and owning the mental and emotional pain he has just endured, the gut-level suffering he has been through.

In verses 4 through 6 he talks about enduring afflictions and sufferings. Then he explains in more detail in verses 8 and 9, writing, “For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death.”

We don’t know for sure what the external circumstances were that Paul is referring to here – commentators debate what events may have led Paul to this state. But what is interesting is that he focuses not on the external details that led him there, but on his internal experience and what it *meant*.

And so Paul acknowledges the mental and emotional suffering he faced, and in a sense he embraces it. He admits that it was more than he could bear. He explains openly that he “despaired of life itself.” He describes how, deep inside, he felt as if he had been sentenced to death.

One commentator summarizes it this way – he says: “The load had become too heavy; all his natural human resources of energy and strength were worn down to nothing. It’s bad enough to hear a magistrate declare that you are sentenced to death; it’s far worse when a voice deep inside yourself tells you that you might as well give up and die. That is the point Paul had reached, the point where the night had become totally dark and all hope of dawn had disappeared.” (Wright, 7). Paul accepts that, and admits that. That is what he experienced.

Where we might avoid and flee from mental and emotional suffering and despair – where we might see it as pointless – Paul owns it.

Why? Why does he do that? Why does he own it?

Paul owns his suffering because he sees that it has a purpose. Paul sees that God is using his suffering to equip him to love other people better. Paul sees that his suffering is for the benefit of those he is ministering to.

Now, how can that be?

Well, Paul states in verse 4 that one of his jobs as an apostle is to comfort God's people with the comfort he has received from God.

Therefore, Paul sees that the comfort he has received, AND the affliction and suffering that made that comfort necessary, are BOTH for the sake of the people Paul is called to love well – in this case, the Corinthians.

That is what verse 6 is all about. Listen to it again. He writes: “If we” – (by ‘we’ he means himself) – “If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation [that is, the Corinthians’]; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.”

That verse sounds so cryptic – but it is actually fairly straightforward. Paul acknowledges earlier, in verse 4, that it is his job to comfort God's people with the comfort he has received from God. He needs to do this when they face suffering as he has. And in order to do this he must receive that comfort from God. And in order to receive that comfort, he must endure affliction that makes the comfort necessary. And so both Paul's suffering, and the comfort he receives, are there to enable him to bring comfort and salvation to God's people.

The principal that emerges from this is that when God's people suffer – whether physically, mentally, or emotionally – it is to equip them to love others better. And in this process suffering is overcome by comfort, and comfort then spreads to other people when they suffer.

Paul's central paradigm for this is Christ. It comes up in verse 5. He writes: “For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.” What Paul shows us is that Christ's death and resurrection must be the lens through which we view ALL our suffering.

Commentator Paul Barnett puts it this way – he says: “‘Christ’ is central to Paul in this experience; he is the *source* from whom sufferings overflow to him and the *channel* through whom the comfort (from God) overflows to him.” (Barnett, 74).

In Christ, death always leads to resurrection, and resurrection always spreads.

And so it is with our suffering. Our suffering leads to God's loving comfort, which, once received, equips us to love and comfort others better. In this pattern of suffering and comfort, God works in his pattern of death and resurrection – a pattern that is fundamental to how God works in the world. As Barnett puts it, “Raising the dead is no abstract attribute, but what God typically does.” (Barnett, 87). And that is how Paul describes God in verse 9.

And so in the midst of suffering, God provides comfort. And Paul is hyper-focused on that theme in this passage. In the space of 5 verses, he uses the word “comfort” 10 times. And the kind of comfort he is referring to is a loving, relational comfort, received both directly from God, and (as we learn later on, in chapter 7 of this letter) from God through his people – in Paul's case through Titus and the Corinthians themselves, who bring comfort to Paul.

But comfort only happens when we allow mental and emotional suffering to hit us, rather than trying to run from it or control it.

That is the catch.

Shortly after news of Brittany Maynard had gone viral and was getting national press coverage, another story also began to get media attention. It was the story of Kara Tippetts.

Kara wrote an open letter to Brittany, encouraging her to rethink her decision to end her own life. As conservative media columnists directed others to Kara's letter, Kara's story also began to receive attention.

Kara was a young mother of four, and the wife of a PCA pastor, who at the age of 39 was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Kara's days were numbered like Brittany's. Kara's prognosis left little reason for hope, like Brittany's. But Kara had chosen to accept the suffering that lay ahead, and she urged Brittany to do the same.

Kara had no illusions about the physical suffering that lay ahead for her, or the mental and emotional suffering that lay ahead for her and her family. The toll had already been great.

Yet Kara, as a Christian, held to a belief that there was a purpose for her and her family in this suffering – even if she could not see what it was.

And she believed that was true not only for her suffering, but for her family's as well. Kara wrote to Brittany:

“In choosing your own death, you are robbing those that love you with such tenderness, [of] the opportunity of meeting you in your last moments and extending you love in your last breaths.”

She goes on to say, “As I sat on the bed of my young daughter praying for you, I wondered over the impossibility of understanding that one day the story of my young daughter will be made beautiful in her living because she witnessed me dying.”

Kara could not *see* the purpose of her suffering or her family's suffering. But she trusted that that purpose was there. She trusted in the “God who raises the dead” – who raises the dead not just with a physical resurrection on the last day, but with comfort and love in the midst of our pain here and now, in this life.

The question is: Are we prepared to do the same?

Are we prepared to own suffering, to experience it, and to let it hit us, trusting that God has a purpose for it, even if we can't see it?

To be clear, I am not talking about *seeking* pain or suffering. We do not need to seek it, nor should we. It will find each one of us soon enough. What I am talking about is how we respond when it is inevitable. What will we do when it shows up at our door?

Will we anesthetize ourselves? Will we try to be stoics? Or will we let it hit us, with the conviction that God brings resurrection out of death – that he brings comfort through pain?

This text contains the startling truth that God will in fact allow us to face more affliction than we can endure. It is right there in verses 8 and 9. Paul writes, “We were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely, not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead.”

You will often hear Christians say that God will never give us more than we can handle. While their hearts may be in the right place when they say it, it is simply not true. It is true that in 1 Corinthians 10:13 Paul says that God will not allow us to be tempted beyond our ability – to be tempted so severely that there is no way for us to resist it. That is an important truth – but it is about God restraining the temptation we face, not the affliction we endure. When it comes to affliction, Paul is clear: he WAS burdened beyond his strength.

Why would God allow that to happen? Here Paul is clear again: to force us to rely not on ourselves but on God. To bring us to the end of ourselves and make us rely on Him.

Paul says that he experienced more than he could bear, and it forced him to rely on God in new ways. And that changed him. Commentators note that Paul seems to be a changed man because of this suffering. He emerges with a new, clearer vision of God.

To trust God better, the Apostle Paul needed to suffer and then receive God’s comfort. The Apostle Paul needed that. Do we really think we are above needing the same thing?

More than that, Paul is better equipped to love the people in his life because of this suffering and comfort he has endured. He says it in verse 4, explaining that God “comforts us in ALL our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those in ANY affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”

While all suffering is unique, Paul tells us that this kind of equipping transfers. It is an equipping that enables us to “comfort those in ANY affliction,” he says. Any affliction. One theologian, speaking about Paul, and the implications for Paul in this text, puts it this way – he says: “Members of the church may be afflicted in ways that the apostles have never experienced, but the apostles are still able to provide comfort through their own experience of comfort in affliction. Here is an apostle who has been flogged and imprisoned; here is a young woman bereaved of a newborn baby; does the apostle's experience give him authority to speak comfort to her? Paul says yes: ‘any’ affliction.” (Leithart) And so our suffering well through our afflictions equips us to love others well as they experience their own afflictions.

This leads us to a startling reality. This means that suffering you experience at one stage in your life may be for the benefit of others at a later stage in your life.

It means that sufferings you have experienced as a young single person may have been for the purpose of better equipping you to love and comfort your future children or spouse in an affliction that they will face.

It means that suffering you experience today may be to equip you to better care for someone you have not even met yet – or someone whom you know, but for an affliction well in the future – far beyond the horizon of what we can see or imagine. It could be for a family member or a fellow church member, a friend or a co-worker. We do not know.

But to experience these benefits – to experience this equipping – we need to suffer well. And that means not anesthetizing ourselves through distractions, or running and hiding from the pain through stoicism, but letting it hit us, and crying out to God for comfort, and being willing to receive that comfort from God, both directly, and through his people.

The apostle Paul assures us that when we suffer well, when we face it and endure it, and seek God in the midst of it, then we are being equipped to love and serve Christ and his people better.

But to suffer well requires faith in the God who raises the dead. It requires that we view all suffering as Paul did: through the lens of Christ’s death and resurrection.

And that is not an easy thing to do.

But it is our calling – it is how we are to follow in the footsteps of Christ, our elder brother.

We can pursue it without fear of his judgment, because we know that he will forgive us when we fail. We can pursue it with a sense of security, because we know that he will lift us up when we fall. We can pursue it with true hope, because we know that he will help us to follow him in suffering well, if we ask him. We can pursue it in faith, because we know that he is the God of all comfort – the God who brings new life out of death.

Amen.

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*This sermon draws especially on material from:*

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*Sources for illustrations:*

Britany Maynard:

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[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mt8AP\\_EhM94](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mt8AP_EhM94)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IHxH0Zb2QI>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yPfe3rCcUeQ>

Kara Tippets:

<http://www.aholyexperience.com/2014/10/dear-brittany-why-we-dont-have-to-be-so-afraid-of-dying-suffering-that-we-choose-suicide/>