

"Paul's Legacy: Peace"

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

A Sermon by Dr. Jim Davis

First Presbyterian Church of Kingwood

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Peace. It's one of Paul's favorite words. He uses it 47 times as he writes his letters. That's over half of all the times the word is used in the whole New Testament! Peace is part of the greeting Paul uses in the beginning of almost all his letters. It's part of the greeting he uses in Second Corinthians too. "Grace to you," he writes to the church at Corinth, "Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." But where does the peace that Paul writes about; where does it come from?

It's a good question, especially when you start to read Second Corinthians, because the truth is peace hasn't been a very big part of Paul's life in the days leading up to this letter. For as you may or may not know, in between the writing of First and Second Corinthians, a conflict flared up. It wasn't the first conflict Paul experienced. And sadly, it wouldn't be the last. But it was certainly one of the most painful.

Among other things, the conflict included accusations that were made about Paul and his co-workers. There were letters sent back and forth. Paul himself wrote a letter in affliction and in anguish that he says was covered with his tears. And we'd like to know more about the situation, who was involved, and what went on. But the fact is, we don't know and we'll probably never know. We only know what Paul shares with us in Second Corinthians.

So the first few sentences of Second Corinthians, when you stop and think about it, are truly remarkable. For they tell us that grace and peace has come back into Paul's life, grace and peace and comfort.

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," Paul writes, "the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort which we ourselves have received from God."

And although that's a complex sentence, it makes a pretty simple point. The point is peace. Paul has it now. He didn't before. And he's trying to show the

Corinthians and all of us the way it came back to him. He's trying to teach us how it can come back to us. It's part of Paul's legacy to us. So as we look at it this morning, I want to focus our attention on two principles, two principles that grow out of this opening section of Second Corinthians and show us how to find peace again, even after a conflict.

And the first principle is this. Peace comes back to us when we remember our connection, when we remember we are connected, even in the toughest times in our lives to a God who is "our Father." Let me tell you a story that I think illustrates this principle perfectly.

The story comes out of an unlikely place. It comes out of a cafeteria in the basement of Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago, Illinois. A 2009 article in *The Chicago Tribune* told the story. The headline read "Cooking up Compassion." And underneath the headline was a story about a woman named Betty Tucker. She works the night shift in the cafeteria at Children's Memorial as a cook. She's been doing that now for 30 years. And in her work she meets a steady stream of troubled, angry, anxious parents.

On one night, the article said, Miss Betty (that's what she's called by everyone who knows her), Miss Betty served food to a mother whose daughter fell out of a second story window. The mother felt responsible. She served food to a father whose son was battling a rare form of leukemia. The father felt angry. She served food to the grandparents of a child who'd been through seven hours of brain surgery. They felt fearful.

And as the reporter for the story watched Miss Betty talk to each of them. She asked them how they were doin' that night. Then she cooked for them and talked with them while she cooked. Later Miss Betty told the reporter, "When I ask someone, 'How you doin' tonight?' And they say, 'Not good.' I say, 'Don't lose hope. I'm here for you. God is too. And He's gonna get you through tonight.'"

"Just might be," the reporter says at the end of the story, "Just might be that the divine helping on the side is the most essential item on Miss Betty's menu. She stirs it into every entree and every word. And it seems to be the ingredient that keeps the light shining in her all-night kitchen."

It's obvious. Miss Betty knows where comfort comes from, doesn't she? But do we? And if we do, when we're in trouble is that where we turn? Do we turn to God for comfort, or do we try to turn somewhere else? For comfort comes from

one place, Paul says. And he says it over and over again. Comfort comes, he says, from God, and it really can't come from anyplace else.

Oh we can look in other places for it. And we do. Human beings, it turns out have an amazing number of ways we try and comfort ourselves. Psychologists call them "self-comforting behaviors." They've catalogued dozens of them. Some of us use food to comfort ourselves. Some of us use conversations with friends. Some of us find something "fun" to distract us and restore a sense of comfort to our lives.

But Miss Bettye knows better, doesn't she? She knows where comfort comes from. Real comfort comes from re-connecting with God. For God, as Paul writes, is the one "who comforts us in all our troubles." And all it takes for God to comfort us is a moment, a moment when we stop trying to comfort ourselves and instead open our hearts and reach out to receive the real comfort only God can offer us.

And God can offer real comfort. Make no mistake about it, Paul says. For He is "the Father of compassion." Actually the word Paul uses to talk about God's compassion is a pretty interesting word. It's the Greek word *oiktirmos*. And *oiktirmos* is a word that's used pretty sparingly in the Bible. It means to actually feel what another person is feeling, to feel it with them, the same way they do.

And I know people have said this to you. Because they've said it to me too. I know people have told you, "I know what you're feeling right now." But I know you know the truth. And the truth is, they don't! The truth is there are times when emotions going on inside us run so deep, so deep that we know no one else on earth can truly feel what we're feeling. And we're right. There is no one else on earth who can. But there is someone in heaven!

There is someone in heaven, the Bible says, who knows our every thought, and feels our every emotion. There is someone in heaven who knows when words can't express how deeply we feel anguish, or pain, or anger, or grief. There is someone, who in those moments when no-one else knows exactly how we feel. There is someone who knows exactly how we feel. And because he does He is called "the Father of compassion."

Over a hundred times Scripture pauses in the middle of a passage to talk us about God's compassion. God understands us, Scripture says. God understands our emotions. He understands what we feel, and he understands how deeply we feel it. Again and again, we're told, it's true. And the reason we're told so often is because

this truth about God is so crucial for us to understand. It's a truth we need to learn to turn to, a truth we need to learn to trust.

Damien Spikereit is a pastor in Illinois. But when he was in high school his father passed away suddenly. "It was just two days before my high school graduation," he writes. I was a new Christian, still drying off the water from my baptism.

But just like that, I found myself in a place I'd never been before. I wanted to hear God speak. I wanted to know what He had to say about what had happened; how He was going to get me and my family through this difficult time. So I prayed. And I waited for God to speak.

The funeral came. The church was packed. I sat in the front pew with my mother and my two younger sisters. The Lutheran priest spoke, but I don't remember what he said. I was waiting for God to speak.

The service was over. My family lined up in the foyer. Everyone filed past us, offering words of sympathy to us. A lot of people spoke to me. I don't remember what they said. I was waiting for God to speak.

Then I saw her. I saw Kim. I knew her, but not all that well. And she came up to me. She didn't say a word. But she had tears in her eyes. And she simply hugged me and walked away. And then I heard God speak. He said to me, "now you know how I feel too."

"If you want to hear God speak to you" Damien says, "look no further than the one who knows exactly what it's like to be you at any moment in your life. He knows what you're feeling. And he knows how deeply you're feeling it. So if you want to find His comfort, open yourself up to His compassion. Let him prove to you that he understands you. And He will."

God is "the Father of compassion," Paul says. It's the second principle Paul talks about as he talks about comfort and peace in Second Corinthians. And if you grab hold of it, it has life-changing possibilities. For if you know God understands you, then you know you pour out your feelings to Him like no-one else.

You can pour out your feelings to him in prayer. You can tell him exactly how you're feeling. You can be angry with Him, or sad with him, or fearful with Him. And God will understand. You can write a letter to Him. You can do more than one draft. You can take a walk with Him. You can shout to Him. You can whisper

to Him. You can pour out all your feelings to Him. The Bible encourages you to do it and shows you example after example of people who did. Because the truth is God is the one who really wants to hear our feelings, and if we will give them to Him, He will hold on to our feelings so we don't have to.

Psalm 62:8 says it best. Do you know the verse? "Trust in Him at all times," it says, "pour out your hearts to Him, for God is our refuge." You see we need a refuge, a safe place where we can go with our feelings, all of them. We need a trustworthy friend we can talk to, so we can get our feelings out in front of someone and stop carrying them around with us.

And if you discover that God is "the Father of all compassion," Paul says, then you discover He is the one. God is that trustworthy friend. He is the one you can go to and if you go to Him and share your feelings with Him, no matter what they are, He will take your feelings and give you His peace.

But there's a third and final thing Paul wants us to understand about peace and comfort. It's this. God comforts us in all our troubles, Paul says, so we can comfort others. In other words God wants us to turn the comfort we receive into comfort we give away.

God wants us to direct others to Him. He doesn't want us to commiserate with them. He wants us to connect them to Him. He wants us to remind them that they belong to Him. He wants us to tell them that no situation in their life can change that. He wants us to be like Miss Betty. He wants us to remind them that as long as they have God, they have hope.

And He wants us to remind them that God has told us He's "the Father of compassion." He wants us to remind people they can pour out our hearts to Him, give Him their deepest, darkest emotions no matter what they are, because when they do, then just like Paul, they will find that God gives them in return comfort and peace and one more thing.

For Paul says when we learn how to re-connect with God and give God our emotions instead of trying to hold on to them and carry them around ourselves, when we learn how to do that we will find not only comfort and peace, we will find hope too, hope in God, hope for the future. For "our hope," Paul tells the church in Corinth, "is firm." Hope that's firm despite the fact that conflict's flared up in the past? Yes. Why? Because God is still with us and He's still our compassionate Father. Let's pray ...