

Note: The week of this message I was sick with the flu and was feeling very unwell. I managed to only write out a short sermonette and tried my best to deliver it. I did not bother making an audio recording, but several members asked for a copy so I've made it available in print form. – Pastor Chuck

Truths Held in Tension.

So much of our Christian faith, so much of our walk in Christ involves truths which are held in tension. Again and again we encounter these kinds of truths. Two truths that don't seem to match up. They are not comfortable together.

God made the promise to Abraham and Sarah that great nations would come from them, that kings would come from them. That was a truth, a promise. And yet Abraham was 99 years old with no heir, Sarah had never conceived a child and was long past her child bearing years. Both the promise and the circumstance was true, there is tension there. God had a plan to resolve that tension, and Abraham and Sarah got into trouble when they tried to resolve the tension through their own wisdom.

Peter's confession: You are the Christ is true, it reflected his and the other disciples' true belief. But it was also true that the Christ was going to be a suffering Christ. That introduced tension, which Peter tried to politely relieve by giving Jesus a good talking to over in the corner. There was this tension that Jesus was the Christ but also that the Christ would suffer and even die. Peter and the disciples had their own plan about how to relieve this tension, but Jesus let them know they were off track.

Paul says we rejoice in this hope we have in Christ, this peace with God that Christ has attained for us. But Paul says we rejoice also in suffering. That's tension. Rejoicing in both hope and in suffering. We'd rather avoid suffering, or explain it away, or say there is nothing we can do, but rejoice?

Jesus says whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.

The harder we work to preserve ourselves and build ourselves up and become great in accordance with this world the more in danger our soul becomes. The more we abandon this world's definition of success and instead take up our cross and follow Jesus, the more our eternity is secure.

Tension.

And all of this tension, these sometimes seemingly contradictory truths find their resolution in only one place: the cross of Jesus Christ.

That is the place where hope and suffering and sin and righteousness all intermingled, where all these find their ultimate and complete expression in one terrible and wonderful moment. And it is at the cross of Christ that we receive our new identity.

This identity is child of God. One who is at peace with God. A promise as sure as the one God gave to Abraham and Sarah.

So when Jesus says if you would be my disciple you should take up your cross and follow me, he does not mean we are to suffer in the way that he did. We need not pay again the price that was already paid in full.

But what that call is, is a call to this tension. The tension that you are a loved and redeemed saint, righteous in the eyes of God. And the tension that sin still clings, that suffering is a part of our lives. It is a call to rejoice in both our new identity and in the suffering which produces endurance and character.

The temptation though can be to focus on the suffering itself.

To make the suffering our identity. To make it our righteousness... to compare, to glorify, to say if you had only walked a mile in my shoes. And if we allow our narrative to be a narrative of suffering or victimhood we are taking up our cross but instead of following Jesus we are instead making that cross we bear the center of our world. This is a sort of Christianity which forgets about what happened three days later. We are attaching ourselves to Friday but we are forgetting that Sunday is what truly defines our future.

“But it is in suffering that we learn to endure, not on the basis of our own strength of will, but because we rest in the peace Christ gives: we know that the sufferings do not define our identity since Christ already has.” – Dr. Robert Kolb

So suffering is a part of our Christian walk but it is not what defines us. What defines us is the hope that we have. Paul so perfectly summarized that hope in Romans chapter 5 and so I conclude now with two of those verses:

... 5,6 and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.