



Westminster Presbyterian Church
 Knoxville, TN
 June 9, 2024
 The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
 Sermon: "Beyond All Measure"

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

4:13 But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture--"I believed, and so I spoke" --we also believe, and so we speak,

4:14 because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence.

4:15 Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

4:16 So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.

4:17 For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure,

4:18 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.

5:1 For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

I had a low point last week.

"Beyond All Measure"

Next weekend, I have a reunion of sorts with the guys on my old crew team at the University of North Carolina.¹ We go back some 20 years ago. We've kept up; we see each other every few years.

So of course, for the past few weeks I've been running, lifting weights, skipping dessert, all under the illusion that I can make myself look 18 again instead of 41. It's not going well.

¹ <http://uncmensrowing.org>

Seeing college friends takes me back to a more competitive, more superficial place than where I normally reside. Do you have people in your life like that?

My college friends are all now high-powered lawyers and consultants living in DC or New York. So, that doesn't help things.

- One of them works in Cory Booker's office.
- Another is at the EPA.
- Another is an attorney for Amazon – he's the one who pays for everyone's meals.

The low point for me this week was Wednesday, about 5:00 in the afternoon. I was driving the kids home, and they were just fighting, and fighting, and fighting in the backseat. I was hungry. I was losing my patience.

And I was thinking about the reunion, and something that I used to tell myself when I was 18 just popped in my head.

Around the time that I was finalizing my plans to choose a major and commit to ministry, I remember thinking, 'Well, God didn't put me on this Earth for success in corporate America.' You could see why I'd need to tell myself that a lot, hanging out with this crowd.

And yes, I know what you're thinking. I agree. I was a bit of an insufferable teenager.

In fact, that's exactly what I was thinking, Wednesday afternoon. Hungry, tired, the kids fighting, waiting for a red light in Knoxville traffic, comparing myself to my friends, I was also thinking, 'Isn't it dumb that they let 18-year-olds make life decisions like that, anyway?!'

Like I said, it was a low point.

Fast forward to the next morning, Thursday. I'm showered. Now rested and fed. The kids have settled into a quiet détente. Getting ready to go to church, I had the opposite thought. 'Boy, I'm glad I wasn't asked to choose a career yesterday.' After a hard day in middle age.

I think I was more clear eyed and faithful at 18.

And, don't get me wrong, I'm so, so, so thankful to be where I am.

But I have to think, I can't be the only one, who has afternoons like that. Do you have your low points?

Wherever you stand, you live in a culture, that is deeply image-based and achievement-based and triumphalist. The very system, it seems, is built off competition and hierarchy. We're always asked to look ahead to the next thing, or if not ahead, to look over on the other side of the fence – comparing ourselves to others, often feeling we don't measure up.

Do you ever worry you're not measuring up?
I mean, how could you not? It's baked into the system.

In this way, we are not far from the culture in which Paul was writing his letters to the church in Corinth. In the middle of the 1st Century, Corinth was a Roman outpost, also steeped in a culture that was deeply status driven.

In Corinth, you showed you were a good person by doing well, materially.

The emperor bestowed favors on his friends; those friends bestowed favors on their friends; these people made up the higher classes, the ruling classes – these were the people you looked up to. In Corinth, you showed you were a good person by doing well, materially.²

And, then there was Paul. Who from what we can tell, wasn't doing well, materially. Maybe not physically, either. You can read it between the lines.

For example, in our verses today, he mentions:

“This slight momentary affliction” v. 17.
And, “Our outer nature...wasting away” v. 16.

You get the feeling that he's not just talking generally.

He's more specific in later verses:

2 Corinthians, chapter 12:

² I'm indebted to Mitzi L. Minor's great work for my understanding of this Scripture. See *2 Corinthians: A Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2009).

To keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.

We don't know what the thorn was, by the way. Many speculate it was something physical or in his speech that made Paul stand out. Whatever it was, it must have been so obvious, he didn't even need to name it to the Corinthians. They knew he was talking about.

As for success, Paul didn't have of that much to show either:

2 Corinthians, chapter 11:

Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was ship-wrecked...on frequent journeys, in danger...from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.

In a status-driven culture, Paul, who always seems so sure in his writing, doesn't have much to boast about.

And yet, even so, in our passage today:

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 not simply comparing our earthly existence to what we will be in heaven. He's not even contrasting the outer body, with the enteral soul.

Instead, the 'inner nature' he's talking about is what we truly are in the eyes of God. In contrast to the superficial hierarchies of Roman culture, or even our own, in the eyes of God we are not less than. In the eyes of God, we are beloved:

From now on...we regard no one from a human point of view...[for] if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new. 2 Corinthians, chapter 5.

Notice all that is in the present tense.

That which we truly are, not someday, but today, is determined:

- not by the measure of status;
- not by a look across the fence at greener pastures;
- and surely not by the way we judge ourselves at a low point the afternoon of a hard day.

That which we truly are, that which Paul is trying so hard to draw our attention to, is our belovedness, in the eyes of God: “an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure,” he calls it.

This week I heard an interview with Heather Lanier, author of a new memoir entitled *Raising a Rare Girl*, an account of Lanier’s experiences with her daughter Fiona, who is living with a rare genetic condition known as Wolf-Hirschorn syndrome.³ Parts of the short arm of Fiona’s 4th chromosome are missing. She has always been small. Her mobility and speech are limited.

And as a mother, Lanier has been told, ever since her daughter was born, that Fiona, didn’t measure up to the developmental charts we are all placed upon.

All those charts and bell curves, Lanier said, in the interview, of course, have their place. They help kids get the services they need. But with them, intentionally or not, often comes the message of, you better measure up; and your kid better measure up. And if they don’t measure up, then there’s something wrong with you and your family.

For example, there’s a gut-wrenching part of the interview early on where she recounts how, when her daughter was born full term, weighing just 4 pounds, 12 ounces, a pediatrician came into her hospital room, only three days post-partum, and said, in an offhand sort of way, ‘well it was either bad seed or bad soil.’ Meaning something was deficient – either in the womb or child.

And on and on, through overt messages like that one, and in countless other, more subtle ways, that’s what Heather Lanier heard about her daughter: there was a deficit. She was off. She was wrong. Fiona was deficient.

There’s a lot of opportunity for blame there, as a parent. ‘What did I do wrong?’ Lanier would ask herself.

³ Excerpts from *Everything Happens with Kate Bowler*, “Whole and Holy with Heather Lanier.” Season 12. <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/whole-and-holy/>

And then, one day, Lanier met with a geneticist, who explained what was going on.

I'll quote from the interview:

[The geneticist] said...nothing about this was something that you did, mom. It's a part of living in a body...[Our] DNA chromatids...stick together and rip apart [in meiosis]. And... things...get left behind when they're sticking together and ripping apart...[We need it] because it creates the most [genetic] diversity.

And then Lanier, over time, came to the realization that her child was not a deficit. She was certainly not a developmental failure. She was, as Lanier puts it, 'a celebration of diversity.'

And then she said, in the interview:

And any environment in which [my daughter] is not seen that way is not okay...Any school environment that sees [Fiona] as deficient because she's not going to fit into your bell curve, that's not an okay environment. Any doctor who looks at her and...has this sort of deficit thinking is not an okay doctor. And that thinking is all over the culture. So, we have to do a lot of work.

She goes on to talk about the way God sees her daughter. When you think back on Genesis, she says, you tend to remember God *naming* everything as good. But that's not what the Scripture puts it. It says God *sees* everything as good. The work is to see in the way God sees, and to know, that Fiona, and each and every one of us, is whole and holy and complete.

Not a deficit always needing to be fixed.

'Whole and Holy' was the name of the interview. 'Whole and holy.'

God sees us as 'Whole and holy.'

Or, as Paul would put it, "A Weight of Glory Beyond All Measure."

For in Christ, God was reconciling the world to Godself.

Not for some time way off in the future but for today. And that may be what is unseen, in a world so caught up with image, and status, and comparisons, but that doesn't make it any less real. And that doesn't make us any less whole.

Kate Bowler is the associate professor of American Religious History at Duke University Divinity School. She was the one interviewing Heather Lanier for her podcast, “Everything Happens.” Kate Bowler closes their conversation with these words:

When our lives don't follow the trajectory we hoped, it feels like we've been handed a decline narrative. The diagnosis, the divorce, the job loss, the kid who doesn't make progress, the never ending battle against our bodies through dieting or self-hatred or disease. It's so much easier to say I'm off the paradigm and this cannot be good. I cannot be good in this scenario. But...look, we're not [simply meant to be] plotted on a growth chart. Our humanity is not [meant to be] mapped against some ideal. We're not inherently...a problem.

Paul would agree. He would go further.

He would say, it's not just that we're not a problem.

It's not just that the measures of this world don't get the final say.

It's more. It's that we have this inherent worth.

Made possible by a God who came near to us in Christ.

Made real, by a grace that will not let us go.

So that, when you are at your highest or your lowest,
whether you're stuck in traffic after a hard workday,
or you're sitting in a doctor's office hearing a new diagnosis,
or you find yourself, in a life you didn't plan for,
or in a body that feels more pain than comfort some days,
even when our outer nature is wasting away,
we have this inner worth, this inner being, being renewed day by day.

And so, in our days of triumph and also in our deepest despair, we always have occasion to keep our heads up, to come together and worship the God who sees us as beloved, to embrace one another, and stand beside one another, and to sing. Yes, every day, we even an occasion to sing.

In the highs and in the lows, we can come to this place, the beautiful, broken and yet whole people we are, proclaiming and singing, that we belong to each other and we belong to God.

Yes, in the highs and lows of this life, we belong to God.

We belong to God. Amen.