

I got interested in our Epistle lesson today when I realized that in it, the Apostle Paul likens our bodies to a prison. Sort of! So, I asked a person who has served time in prison, “Does your body feel like a prison?” He looked at me as if I were hopelessly naïve and assured me that living in his body **in no way** resembled living in prison. He then proceeded to enumerate the privations of prison life. That’s where we left the conversation, but this man is a lot younger than we are, so maybe **he’s** the one who is hopelessly naïve. I’ll let him find out for himself when his time comes.

Maybe, though, each of us has ailed at one time or another, no matter our age. Perhaps, even, you—like the Apostle Paul—live with some chronic ailment or another. So maybe you will understand what Paul meant when he said that our “outer nature” is “wasting away.”

Paul’s point, though, was not to lament the state of his physical health. He was intent on urging his fellow Christ-followers to “not lose heart.” This whole letter to the church in Corinth urged them to endure in the face of suffering. To this end, Paul shared where to find comfort. He contrasted our “outer nature,” our bodies which are wasting away, with our “inner nature,” which Paul said is “being renewed day by day.”

We know that our inner, spiritual nature does not get renewed just by getting older. Instead, we nurture a “spirit of faith” in two ways:

- By what we “feed” our inner spirit, and
- By what we allow our renewed spirit to lead our bodies to do in Christ’s name.

This is the spiritual equivalent of eating good food and getting proper exercise, the spiritual equivalent of how we keep our failing physical bodies in shape. So, too, we keep our inner spirit in good order by the intake of scripture and worship, and by the exercise of thanksgiving and prayer.

Paul said that such a spiritual health regimen prepares us for the life we will experience after our earthly life ends. And here is the danger of Paul’s theology: He **seems** to side with what later would be the Gnostics, those who taught that matter such as our bodies are bad and eternally mortal, while our spirit will escape our bodily prisons and live forever.

The problem with this is that God declared **all** of creation “very good.” And Paul later says in his latter called Philemon (3:2) that “in heaven Christ will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”

Here Paul reminded us that Christ Jesus’ Resurrection, including Resurrection of his body, will be a model for our own post-life experience. Like Christ, our bodies as well as our spirits will be renewed.

Paul said, “So, we do not lose heart.” And Paul also prayed that our external wasting away would increase our thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

In last week’s epistle, which continues in today’s, Paul likened our bodies to clay jars—non-secure, degradable storage. In today’s lesson he calls our bodies something else, “the earthly tent we live in.” He said that we are made this way, mortal, so that we will know that what he called “this extraordinary power” of our inner selves belongs to God.

Paul’s testimony about his own inner self is this: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.” (2 Corinthians 4:8-10)

You will notice that Paul’s theology does not explain away death as somehow caused by our sin. For Paul, death is a part of the same creation that God judged to be “very good.” And death’s function, for Paul, is to prepare us for our eternal home.

This is the “spirit of faith” that Paul invokes in today’s lesson, the spirit that initiates our desire to speak and to act on Christ’s behalf. This is the same spirit that made Paul and the other apostles fearless of death, seeing death as a way of sharing in Christ Jesus’ fate.

This lesson that Paul gave us seems like a tall order, one that sounds good but seems difficult to pull off. And yet, Paul wasn’t talking theoretically. His letters tell us that:

- He suffered a chronic affliction;
- He had been imprisoned and repeatedly beaten, flogged, and even stoned;
- He had been shipwrecked three times, once spending a whole 24 hours adrift at sea; and
- He endured many other dangers.

Paul’s testimony is that he will not give in to infirmity, he will not give in to pain, or to the ravages of time BECAUSE HE KNOWS that the Spirit that gives him faith will lead into a new reality. In the end, Paul says, just as Christ Jesus rose from the dead, so too will we. And that was Paul’s and is our ultimate hope. And yet, Paul also has a hope, through God’s Spirit, for a new reality in the here and now.

I got a call a week or so from one of our parishioners across the street at Elancé named Shirley. Shirley has given me permission to tell you that her leukemia is now so far out of remission that she is

now undergoing chemo treatments. She asks for your prayers. And yet, even as she shared this news, she affirmed her faith that God is in charge, whatever the outcome.

I know that you know about faith such as Shirley's, testimony such as Shirley's. Perhaps you, too, are a long-term cancer survivor. Two of our long-time parishioners, Dan and Martha Swearington (may they rest in peace) had something like 11 cancers between them before they succumbed to other diseases. And yet, each and every week, they hauled themselves out of bed, did God's work in the world, and came to thank God at worship.

Today's epistle lesson tells us to nurture our precious inner spirit, even while our outer natures are wasting away.