

Finding Comfort in the Uncomfortable

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Text: I Corinthians 15:35-38

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I like having some measure of control. I'm not really a control freak..... really I'm not.

I just don't like not having control.

My wife Debbie does a lot better with this than I do. Not long after we married, over forty years ago, she realized I had an issue with control when she discovered that I don't like roller coasters.

Debbie loves roller coasters. And after several disastrous trips to Six Flags Over Texas in which we visited their various instruments of torture, she began to analyze my aversion to them.

She said, "You love speed. You love going over hills and around curves fast. But you don't like being in a roller coaster despite the fact that's all they do."

Eventually she diagnosed my problem. "You know, if they put a steering wheel on roller coaster cars - even if it was a fake one - you'd be happy."

She's right. I want to feel like I have some control. And life doesn't care. Life just doesn't care that I want to feel some control.

Life doesn't even care about whether I know what's coming next. It just isn't concerned that I can't see around corners. Life doesn't give a Fig Newton about my comfort level.

And I know the big facts of life as well as you do: All things that are called into existence by God eventually will end, even our lives. There are some things over which we have some control, but ultimately life just keeps rolling on with or without us. Nor do we know for sure what comes next. However much we may yearn to be in the driver's seat, much of the time (maybe most of the time), life's steering wheel either doesn't work or is being handled by somebody else.

This is the reality behind today's reading from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians; it is a curious, interesting, maybe even unnerving, little passage of scripture about life and death and what may be coming next, whether in life or in death.

It's a short passage of scripture so let's read it again.

"Someone may ask, 'How are the dead raised? What sort of body will they have in the resurrection?' What a silly question! (says St. Paul) What you sow doesn't come up until it has passed away. When you sow a field, you don't put a full-grown plant into the ground do you? No. You plant a seed, like a kernel of corn. And when that seed germinates it will grow up into exactly the kind of body God intends for it to have."

I grew up on a farm in East Texas about halfway between Lufkin and Nacogdoches. I can still remember

following my grandfather and a sad looking mule plowing down furrows of clotted red dirt. I must have been five or six at the time. I recall the cycle of plowing and seeding a field, making sure it had fertilizer, praying for sun, praying for rain, praying for it to stop raining.

Mostly what you do on a farm is a peculiar sort of waiting. Most farmers I know wish they had a lot more control over the weather and nature. Even when the first shoots of spring appear, there's not much you can do but pray and keep hoeing the weeds.

Tugging on the sprouts just uproots them. It won't make them grow any faster. I was always amazed in summer to see pole beans and corn and tomatoes and cucumbers and potatoes growing where we'd plowed that bleak earth. It seemed like a miracle. And I suppose it was.

God gave just the right bodies to the seeds we put into the ground, and, in time, we were nourished by what came up.

There's a nifty slight of hand going on in this image that Saint Paul conjures up about the resurrection. "Questions about How?" won't get us very far, St. Paul tells us. "How does this resurrection thing work?" "What will happen next?" Won't resolve our anxieties, because none of us can peep under the curtains of the future.

The only question that promises to give us any real lasting comfort in life is "the Question of Who?"

Who is really in charge of life? Who holds the future? Who holds us in that future?

There's never a lack of things we have to do.

We plow. Wait. Pray.

We Cultivate. Wait. Pray.

We live. Wait. Pray.

We Love. Wait. Pray.

But ultimately, the world rests in the hands of someone far wiser and far more loving than we.

Whether it is the future of our souls and bodies in the resurrection of the dead; or the future of our children and grandchildren and all of those we love; or the future of this wonderful church that we care about so deeply: every future is held in the same loving hands.

I learned this lesson slowly and have had to relearn it over and over. But the first time I learned it as a concrete existential fact of my life can be looked up on a calendar. It was toward the end of the summer of 1989. We had been visiting our families for a few weeks here in the States, before returning to Scotland where I was wrapping up my Ph.D.. A routine doctor's exam turned into a crisis for our family.

Debbie's doctor found a lump in her neck. It turned out to be a malignant tumor. It had been there awhile. It had already spread. Within a couple of days, she was in surgery.

During the night after that surgery, I sat awake all night long in a chair by her bed. I read and prayed cover to cover the old Episcopal "Book of Common Prayer" with all its scripture readings and collects. There was one particular prayer I passed over. I couldn't make myself pray it. But I kept coming back to

it all through that long night. It wasn't till just before dawn that I realized somewhere deep inside of me the message God was trying to get through my thick skull with that prayer. You'll see what I mean when I read you this prayer now.

“Almighty God, we entrust all who are dear to us to thy never-failing care and love, for this life and the life to come, knowing that thou art doing for them better things than we can desire or pray for, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.”

God loves us.

God loves the whole world.

God loves all of those we hold precious as well as those we don't.

God loves this church, its members and its mission, its past and its future.

And God is doing better things for everyone and all we love than we can hope, imagine, or ask.

Today, the significance of the insight at the heart of this passage and of this prayer rests upon us all. As we look to all our futures, we are short on how and what, but we can trust the loving God in whose hands we rest. This is our comfort in life and in death.

Let us pray:

“Almighty God, we entrust all who are dear to us to thy never-failing care and love, for this life and the life to come, knowing that thou art doing for them better things than we can desire or pray for, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.”