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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Second Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 6)
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Lectionary Year B: 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

"For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure" (2 Corinthians 4:17).

What are our "slight momentary afflictions"? Certainly, there is no shortage of them. Minor aches and pains, the inconvenience of a detour or traffic jam, and an Internet service outage might qualify here. Speaking personally, I got a bit too much sun down in Arizona and, yes, I could "feel the burn," so I suppose you could say that I was "afflicted" -- but, rest assured, I'm much better now.

Yet we all know people for whom the slightest momentary affliction is a profound crisis. These folks are the chronic complainers, the whiners...the ones who have known little real suffering, so any minor suffering seems to them catastrophic! On the other hand, we know people who minimize their own suffering to the point of denying its existence, which isn't exactly helpful or healthy, either. No one is superhuman, for sure, and eventually, something has to give. These are the folks whom you pass and can practically hear the time bomb going "tick, tick, tick."

Assuming that one has both good self-knowledge and a healthy sense of perspective, these words from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians make sense. Let's hear them again: "For this slight mo-

mentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure..." Paul is saying, "Times may be tough now, but stick it out and things will get better." Also, we, along with folks in Paul's day, might be turning our "slight momentary afflictions" into something much greater.

My hope for the world, post-pandemic, is that people will have the perspective and capacity to enjoy life more and complain less, and that they'll be more thoughtful and less reptilian. We'll see...

But without perspective, people jump to conclusions and make rash decisions...some may even be led to self-destructive or lethal activities. Indeed, the big picture is missing, which for Paul is the destination to which the Christian community is headed. He writes: "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" (2 Corinthians 4:18).

No surprise that faith is a comfort for people when times are tough!

With the proper perspective, most things are, in fact, like minor aches and pains, the inconvenience of a detour or traffic jam, or an Internet service outage. They are slight momentary afflictions, not grave problems! But if you're anything like me, you have some sort of genetic predisposition for pessimism, which causes you to lose perspective and conclude that, even though there's something great awaiting us in the end, there is no cause for hope in the meantime.

One of my Dad's colleagues at Crystal Sugar was known for his (partially) facetious sayings and quips, one of which was, "Things will go along like this for a while...and then they'll get worse." (Always one of my favorites!) While I take such a saying to be essentially tongue-in-cheek -- and quite funny -- others' outlooks may actually be that gloomy. But Paul's wisdom from this morning's text requires us to look beyond the gloom, and perhaps even to bring that vision of the eternal into our present reality.

Now for the hard part...

While Paul does a terrific job of encouraging the Corinthian community to keep its eyes on the prize (the prize being eternal life with the Lord), we don't hear anything about improving the present reality. Remember, though, that most early Christians believed that Christ would return within their own lifetimes -- a belief that automatically alters one's take on the present. If the light at the end of the tunnel is there, all one needs to do is be patient and endure...as opposed to figuring out how to make light in the tunnel.

Certainly, when we face real hardship that cannot be answered with platitudes like "things may be awful for a really long time, but think about the eternal life to come," we don't want hardship to be met with idleness or resignation. If such a situation means that a person must suffer for the remaining sixty or so years of his or her life, there is a Christian duty to do more than say, "This slight momentary affliction is preparing you for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure."

Yet it seems like far too many Christians are only willing to do that much...

When things look bad in the world around us, we can, indeed, look to what is eternal; this world is temporary and God has something waiting for us that's much better. But it might not be the best use of our God-given time and resources to let this world fall to ruin because it's "just temporary" and thus doesn't really matter. For some reason, I think Paul would shake his head were we to read him this way.

Sometimes, Christians need to offer a bit more than pious thoughts about the hereafter as a way of consoling people in the present. If we're sitting on a boatload of life preservers, we must not say to the drowning man, "Oh, well, there really isn't anything we can do, but God loves you and has a place for you in heaven." Again, while it is possible to read this morning's text this way, I cannot imagine such a reading being acceptable to Paul, the person who wrote it.

In our text, Paul also wrote, "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" (2 Corinthians 4:15). God's grace cannot extend any farther than you and me when we fail to follow the Spirit's guidance to share that grace with others. Thus, our idleness in the face of hardship would stifle the spread of God's grace. It's that simple. As a Christian community, do we witness to God's grace in word and deed? Are we thankful to God for that grace? Does our public example resemble our private

devotion?

Indeed, there often are situations when more than pious thoughts are demanded of us. We've been hearing, once per month, from representatives of organizations receiving our outreach dollars (and today is no exception), and yes, our support of these organizations is a way for God's grace to be shared, where the effects of it can be tangible and real for those on the receiving end. May we always know that pious thoughts about "slight momentary afflictions" are not helpful to, say, the clients of St. Margaret's House in South Bend. People have needs for things like shelter and work; if such things aren't even the slightest slivers of God's grace, then I must be reading from the wrong Bible!

The church, therefore, is a community that promotes, encourages, and nurtures good things like those mentioned. And our monthly outreach is an opportunity to let God's grace shine through us in supporting organizations like St. Margaret's House. God doesn't want anyone's life to be crappy and hopeless, and evidence from Scripture suggests that God's grace -- whether through shelter, work...you name it -- is intended for all of God's children.

Again, as Paul wrote, "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."

Let's be sure, therefore, that we realize what our "slight momentary afflictions" are...but also remember that we mustn't belittle the real afflictions of others even when we think of them as tem-

porary. As you've probably guessed already, Paul's wisdom here is wisdom to be applied skillfully. There aren't too many folks in this world (especially now) who are looking for a pious thought and a pat on the head; rather, some glimmer of the grace of God needs to be real in and around this place. And we are the ones called to turn Christian faith into action, starting here with God's grace and sharing it with all.

Amen.