

June 28, 2015

Desert Blooms

2 Corinthians 8:1-9, 13-15

Pastor Puls, Senior Pastor at Hope Lutheran Church

For the past three weeks, we've been digging into 2 Corinthians. Our sermons this month have been focused on our real troubles – and, Lord knows, we've all got plenty of those, don't we? But each week we're reminded by God's Word that we should never feel hopeless. We have real hope in Jesus Christ. Our Savior's sacrificial, saving love brings genuine, lasting hope to our real-life struggles.

Today, though, in 2 Corinthians 8, there's a little twist. This Bible reading tells us about a group of Christians who were in real trouble. But instead of reading here about how God gave them real hope, today we read about how they were able to bring real hope to others.

And, friends, there's a universal lesson in this story. Here's a beautiful spiritual life lesson for us. Because we, too, face real troubles. But sometimes, even in the midst of our struggles, we may be the ones who are able to bring real hope to others.

Let's look at 2 Corinthians 8:1-2. "We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part."

Who were these severely afflicted Christians mentioned in our story, and what was their particular problem? Very simply, they were poor. They didn't have any money. Maybe it was the economy in their region. Maybe they had lost their jobs. Maybe they were being persecuted for their faith. We

don't really know, and it doesn't really matter. All we know is that there was a group of Christians in Macedonia who were living in "extreme poverty."

We read here, though, that the Macedonians had sent in a generous gift of money. Paul was taking up a collection from all the churches in the Mediterranean world to help the churches in Jerusalem, who were suffering from a horrible famine. And he reports to the Corinthian church, to give them an apostolic fundraising nudge, that the Macedonian churches have somehow scraped together some funds and made a generous contribution.

Now, remember, the Macedonians were poor, broke, living in "extreme poverty." But that didn't stop them. Even in their severe trial, they had an "abundance of joy", Paul says.

And, for most people, those words ("severe test of affliction," "abundant joy," "extreme poverty," "generosity") don't all seem to fit together, do they? But the Christ-followers in Macedonia had abundant joy, and they were able to be generous, because they understood that nothing in this world -- not persecution, not poverty, not hardships, not affliction -- could ever separate them from God's love for them in Christ Jesus. Their joy was abundant, in spite of their real troubles. Why? Because they knew that nothing could rob them of the joy of being saved.

The headline in this story is not the money the Macedonians gave. It's their attitude. The point for us is that their real troubles did not consume them, control them, or defeat them. Their real life troubles didn't stop them from lending a hand, or from being a conduit of hope for others. These Christians had a joyful, thankful attitude every day, because they knew God had saved them.

What about these Christians (*us*)? The Macedonians had real troubles; but their love of God, and the joy of their salvation, still blossomed in a beautiful way – even in the harsh reality of their real troubles.

Have you ever traveled, or lived, in the desert regions out west? It's hot out there, dry, sandy, rocky, barren, almost lifeless. But every so often, in the harsh desert, you see a bloom, or a bunch of flowers. And it's quite a spectacular sight.

Sometimes a Christian can be a flower in the desert. Could you be the one – despite your trials and tribulations -- who can still find a way to share hope, to give love, to care about others in the name of Jesus, even when you are going through real troubles? Can you be that Christian? Can you be that desert bloom?

There's a little girl I know up in New York. She's four years old. I married her parents, I baptized their kids, and I served as their pastor for many years. The little girl, Mandy, was diagnosed last month with a dangerous, deadly tumor in her brain. It came out of nowhere, and it's a devastating situation. Her parents are just crushed, as you can easily imagine. And, yet, there are moments in their despair, when their faith and trust in God shines through. They post a Facebook message. They tweet a few words. And they don't know it, but they're doing an amazing job of somehow bringing hope to me – and reminding other people, too, about God's strong, sure love.

I've visited many people in the hospital who are dark and gloomy. And I understand that. I don't blame them. They've got real troubles. But I've walked into hospital rooms where there's a Christian who's just shining somehow. That person is showing love to nurses and doctors and fellow patients, in

simple ways. These Christians are ministering to the hospital community around them, even while they're going through their own trials. These aren't super-Christians, or wacky, unrealistic Christians. These are just believers in Jesus who are keeping their attitudes joyful because they know God is keeping them safe in his forgiving, saving, eternal love. They know Christ, they know real hope in him, and they're able to share that hope.

Aren't they doing what the Macedonian Christians did? Their troubles are intensely real, but so is their hope in Jesus Christ intensely real. And sometimes, friends, when we're the ones facing real troubles, we can still speak of our hope in simple words. We can still live out our faith in simple actions. We can still hang on to a simple attitude of joy about our salvation ... and we can be the ones, like a flower in the desert, to help bring hope to others.

May God's love for you in Christ give you real hope in your real troubles. Amen.