



**"HOUSE KEEPING"**  
**SCRIPTURE: 2 CORINTHIANS 4: 13-5:1**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**  
**June 6, 2021**  
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**2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1**

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, 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. 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. So 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. 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.

The Word of the Lord.  
**Thanks be to God.**

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What's your house-keeping groove?

Is it vacuuming to the oldies? **(picture of ms. doubtfire vacuuming)**

Do you get energized hunting for those pesky, yet somehow adorable, little dust bunnies **(picture #1 of dust bunny and picture #2 of dust bunny)**

Maybe you just want to make your toilet great again **(picture of toilet great again brush)**

For some, housekeeping is a way to bring order out of chaos, a way to clear energy, to take care of the people we love, a way to calm our nervous systems, to get our thoughts organized, a way to feel like we can actually have a positive impact on something when nothing else seems to be going the way we want it to around us.

Housekeeping can be good therapy, good medicine, a way to feel in control, like all is right with the world, like for just a little while there is some kind of equilibrium in our lives.

For others, housekeeping is a form of torture--a task despised and avoided at all cost. Maybe cleaning seems like a waste of time, a burden, or something someone else should do, something we are too busy to do. Something else is always more pressing and more important than taking care of our own space.

Or maybe it's something we just don't have the energy to do. It feels like too much, like things are just too stressful or overwhelming, like it doesn't really matter anyway. Maybe some of us are in a persistent state of stress or sorrow or exhaustion or crisis.

Housekeeping can be a constant source of stress, judgment--those dust bunnies just staring back at you, telling you that you're a failure and that you'll never be able to do or be what you are supposed to do or be.

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I imagine Paul was the type of guy who went back and forth between these two ways of orienting to the world around him. Sometimes he sounds really settled and organized. Other times he is clearly under duress and maybe even irritated by how quickly communities can create chaos and misunderstanding.

2nd Corinthians is made up of several fragments of multiple letters written to the church in Corinth. And at some point, someone organized those fragments into these two books in the Bible we call 1st Corinthians and 2nd Corinthians. 2nd Corinthians--at least the first 9 chapters is actually probably something more like 4th Corinthians.

Paul had a relationship with the Corinthian community that spanned several years. He knew them well and they knew him. He had visited them at one point and probably stayed several months, over a year. He also had several associates and colleagues he dispatched to spend time there when he was not able to get back.

This fragment of his letters came after he had written a more difficult letter to this community he knew and loved. He kept getting frustrating news from them. And then there apparently was a person who had spoken ill of him and tried to turn people against him and his teachings.

Paul was a pretty zealous human being--on the one hand he didn't let things slide. He put in the work to call people in and bring them back to the values and truths that he believed define living a life for Christ in community.

On the other hand, he also seemed to accept the fact that following Christ includes suffering, persecution, and danger. And so, whatever happened--be it a blessing or a challenge, he seemed to see it as a way for him to grow stronger in his faith.

The promise of life in Christ is real right now and beyond our current reach all at the same time--the already and not yet that defines the life of faith.

This particular passage is all about that already, not yet and how it manifests itself in the simultaneous realities that we live in as believers. Paul wrote:

*So 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.*

These distinctions are fine and so suggestive. But many Christians through the generations have made the distinctions clunky and unyielding. They read Paul as a hater of bodies, as someone who is just focused on life hereafter, not on the here and now.

Let's be honest, some of this harsh interpretive vice grip Paul was placed in came from church fathers who had an agenda. They needed Paul to authorize their hatred of women and their diminution of women's roles in the church. They needed Paul to authorize hierarchies and exclusion and sharp edges and non-negotiables.

But if we try hearing Paul out as a recovering Pharisee--someone who came from harsh line drawing and punishing piety, but who is trying to heal from that, then we can start to extend him some grace.

I know there are not a lot of feminist theologians out there who want to give Paul grace, but I think we lose so much that is important from his teaching when we don't extend him grace. And by grace I am not saying give him a pass by just saying he was a man of his time and culture.

Moral courage is always an invitation we can embrace--no matter our cultural position or the historic moment we find ourselves in. In any age there are examples of people who risk their lives and their well-being to challenge cultural norms that harm and oppress.

So, the grace I am talking about for Paul is not a pass on any misogyny or superiority that he may have taught or that his teaching has authorized.

The grace I am talking about is the kind of listening we do when we read Paul's letter fragments from our own cultural moment and our own human limitation.

How is he speaking to us about the things that trivialize our community?

How is he speaking to us about the things that diminish our faithfulness, that harm our relationships, that keep us stuck in destructive habits and systems?

Paul is inviting us to pay attention to how we are spending our energy.

He's saying, don't attach our primary energy to the things we see, but invest our best energy in the things we can't see.

Our relationship to the things we can see should be in the service of our deep investment and trust in the things we can't see.

For Paul, Christ-centered faith is about seeing the world through a different lens--a lens that fills and empties the things we can see, all at once.

The things we can touch are only important in their relationship to the things we can't touch.

Everything we can touch is temporary, fleeting, only a partial reflection or manifestation of the true reality that we can't see.

Paul is describing a practice akin to the Buddhist teaching of non-attachment.

That conventional reality that we can see and touch is not everything, in fact it is illusory, it is empty of ultimate reality.

Non-attachment is a subtle practice even though profound.

It means we don't fool ourselves into believing that material reality is everything. In fact, it is always changing. It never really is. Our clinging to

stasis is a delusion. Nothing is ever the same from one second to the next--from the cells in our bodies to the fabric of existence.

Paul's teaching is really about letting go of the need to grasp and cling and control. He is calling us to faithful non-attachment.

It matters how we live and relate and connect to conventional reality. It matters because all of this around us, all of this life, is an opportunity to strengthen the inner nature, the flame of Christ within us, the eternal love that connects us to what is most true about the universe.

There is such freedom in this teaching, Grace Covenant. Such liberation!

When we can stop grasping and hoarding and expecting things to stay the same, then we can start accepting, and trusting, and embracing what God is stitching through our lives even now--that golden thread of eternity that is divine love and healing possibilities.

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This time in exile from our building has been challenging, but it is not wasted time. It has been Holy, sacred, cleansing, strengthening.

Buildings are temporary--and they matter only in relationship to the ultimate reality they call us toward.

Buildings are not sacred in and of themselves, they are not sacred in their materiality, but in their relationality.

The minute we start to cling to the materiality itself, that's when we need some Holy housekeeping--the kind that restores balance and equilibrium and right relationship to Divine Love.

Some people think non-attachment means neglect or even abuse. I do not believe that that is what Paul was teaching.

It is the beautiful things that happen inside our bodies and our buildings that call us to care for them so that they can most strongly cultivate the ultimate truth about our flesh and our bricks and mortar--our bodies and our buildings have the power to amplify love and they also have the power to distract and diminish love.

They are sacred because they embody and amplify God's love. They are also fraught because we can mistake them for everything, for the ultimate reality that they can only point us toward, but that they can never fully contain.

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Grace Covenant, we have some housekeeping to do as we travel the road ahead. As we tidy up the space on 789 Merrimon Avenue that says Grace Covenant on the sign out front, let us remember the point of having a building in the first place. It is not to equate the building with being the church.

This faith community has known that truth for a long time. And your awareness of that and how you have embodied that has manifested in some different ways. Sometimes it got out of balance--just like human communities always do--and God tenderly and powerfully invites balance in difficult times.

Sometimes your awareness about this building's relationship to God's love manifested in expansion and updating the space, sometimes it manifested in neglecting and even mistreating the space, and sometimes it manifested in opening up the space, sharing it, and letting go of a tightly gripped sense of ownership or tradition or convention.

The community Garden is an important touchstone in this church's story around space and place, change and transformation.

The Garden embodies a place of letting go of grasping at conventional reality, of attaching ultimate importance to something that is fleeting.

At the time the Session was discerning about whether to create the Garden out front, some believed the front lawn was sacred and should not have a garden on it. People listened to each other, the Session discerned and they called the community to stretch.

The Garden was a way to stretch those faith muscles, to remind each other that this ground is not ours to control or hoard or hermetically seal in our own limited conceptions of reality. This ground is God's and its beauty is only fully flowering when it amplifies God's love in relationship to a bigger world than just this church community.

And our Garden is growing still--as it, too, can sometimes become a place where people lapse into habits of trying to control and mistaking it, the Garden, for ultimate reality instead of a fleeting reality that is worth our attention and care as it serves the ultimate reality of God's love and justice.

When we let go of those controlling impulses, beautiful things grow!

Our building invites the same careful practice that Paul called his beloved Corinthian siblings toward again and again.

*... we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.*

Our community cannot be defined by pride of possession if we want to be faithful. Following Jesus often means leaving things behind--shifting our relationship to the things we thought we could not live without, trusting God to provide, remembering our ancestors learned to be faithful in the desert, in exile, in a life lived in letting go.

It is so easy to lose ourselves in the things we call ours. And forget that things are only good as they connect us to God's highest good.

White culture has weaponized possession and ownership. White culture has valorized grasping and hoarding. White culture has distorted our relationship with the past, present, and future.

We have an opportunity to do the house keeping that is ahead of us together--in the Spirit of caring for those we love and in the service of restoring balance for a community that has been out of balance for generations.

The way we walk this path ahead matters--every single step matters--not because we need to be perfect, but because faith is built by walking the walk and not just talking the talk.

COVID has been a horrible scourge on this planet and it continues to take lives and amplify inequities. And COVID has taught us many things.

God is still the faithful seamstress, inviting us to make and keep life together with courage--the courage that knows there is always room to grow and there is always space and capacity to be transformed.

*...so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.*

Thanks be to God.