

Grace to you and peace from God, the source of life, and from Jesus, the Christ, who is that light and life in the world. Amen.

Have you ever wondered if someone like Paul, or Jesus, had regrets?

Consider the following story, many of which you know from the book of John, chapter 11: the story of Lazarus.

“Now a certain man was ill,” it says, “Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped His feet with her hair. Her brother, Lazarus was ill, so the sisters sent a message to Jesus. (They texted him.) They said, ‘Lord, he whom you love, is ill.’”

Now this line has made some scholars suggest that Lazarus is the “beloved disciple, the one whom Jesus loved.” Of course, what they often leave out is that the same passage also says that Jesus loved Martha and Mary. In any case, the sisters send Jesus a message.

“They say, ‘Lord, he whom you love, is ill.’ But when Jesus heard it, he said, ‘This illness, this sickness, does not lead to death. Rather, it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.’”

Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, *he stayed two days longer in the place where he was*. Let me repeat that: After learning Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days in the place where he was!

Then, Lazarus dies. When Jesus arrives in Bethany, Martha confronts him immediately. She says, “Lord, if you had been there, my brother would not have died.” Lord, if you had been there, my brother would not have died. Jesus assures her, however, that her brother will rise again...and yet, and yet...When Jesus sees the tomb of Lazarus, what does he do? He cries. He weeps. “He wept.”

I wonder what was going on in Jesus’s mind when he wept. The text simply says that he “was greatly distressed in spirit and deeply moved.” Was it grief, or was it regret, or was it a mixture of the two? Remember Martha’s words: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Did Jesus think, “If only I had arrived sooner, I could have prevented this?” Did Jesus think, “If only I had arrived sooner, I could have kept my friend Lazarus from suffering?” In short, did Jesus experience regret, the way we do?

Now, I wonder the same thing about Paul. As many of you know, especially given the three-part series I did on Paul’s attitude toward women, I am a big fan of Paul. I think he is one of the most misunderstood authors in the history of Western civilization, and

one of the books in the New Testament, 2 Peter ,even says that. The author writes, "Our dear brother Paul, who was hard to understand..."

One of my favorite things about this difficult-to-understand apostle is that he was nevertheless relatable, even if he said some occasionally regrettable things. I mean, here's a guy who was constantly frustrated. "I am afraid that my work, for many of you, have been wasted," he tells the Galatians; and that's not the worst thing he says to them.

Here's a guy who was easily annoyed, as we heard in Acts 16, our First Reading this morning: "One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we..." (and by we, which appears in the second half of the book of Acts, the pronoun "we," some traditionally argue that this is a reference, not only to Paul and his companions, but to Luke, who wrote the Gospel as well as the Book of Acts.)

"...We met a female slave who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, 'These men are slaves of the Most High God who proclaim to you a way of salvation.' She kept doing this for many days, but Paul, very much annoyed, very much irritated, turned and said to the spirit, 'I order you, in the name of Jesus Christ, to come out of her.' And it came out that very hour."

Here's a guy who was easily, and maybe here understandably, annoyed.

Here's a guy who repeatedly stirs up trouble by arguing with his fellow Jews in the synagogues, paying the price of flogging, of beating, of imprisonment. And here's a guy who fails, who fails, as we see in the next chapter of Acts, Acts 17, where he manages to bring only a few of the Athenians, the Greeks, over to his cause, even after approvingly citing their poets and philosophers.

And yet. And yet there's something in Paul, and something especially in Jesus, that enabled them to persevere, in spite of frustration, in spite of annoyance, in spite of trouble, and in spite of failure; something that enabled Paul to sing hymns in prison, as he and his brother Silas do in our First Reading; something that enabled Paul to "carry the marks of Jesus branded on his body," as he says in Galatians, something that enabled Paul to "fight the good fight, to finish the race and to keep the faith," as we read in 2 Timothy.

What I want to know, and perhaps what you want to know, is what that something special was, right? How did he do it? What gave Paul, and especially Jesus, the ability, the tenacity, the strength, the courage, the power to persevere? How in short, did Jesus and Paul cope with failure, frustration, anxiety, despair, and especially, especially regret?

Now, as is perhaps always the case, a couple of you might be asking yourselves, "Why?" Why should we care about whether Paul or Jesus experienced anxiety, despair or regret?

Well, I believe the answer is simple: because we experience these things too, right? And we know how agonizing and immobilizing they can be.

A young woman shares the following story:

"In the final decade of his life, my grandfather woke up every single day at 7am, picked a fresh wildflower on his morning walk, and took it to my grandmother. One morning, I decided to go with him to see her. As he placed the flower on her gravestone, he looked up at me and said, 'I just wish I had picked her a flower every morning when she was alive. She really would have loved that.'"

What can Paul or Jesus teach us, not only about coping with failure, but as in this story, facing regret? Well, I think there are four things they can teach us.

First, we are not alone. Others share our experience. Others share your experience, that includes not only people in the Bible, but also God. If indeed, as John says, "The Word became flesh in Jesus Christ," and if indeed "Jesus wept," as we read in the story of Lazarus, according to John 11, then *God* wept, through him and in him for his friend, Lazarus.

Psalm 103, puts it this way: "As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear Him, for he knows that we were made, and he remembers that we are dust." Not only does He know these things, He feels these things in Jesus Christ.

So repeat after me: "We are not alone."

Second, we have one another. People, today, as we have our annual picnic, we should remind ourselves that we are better together, that we have been called out of isolation into fellowship. Fellowship gives us the opportunity to lean on one another, to console one another, to pray for one another, and to worship with one another. Paul and Silas didn't spend time regretting the fact that they ended up in prison. According to our First Reading, they kept going, praying and singing hymns in fellowship together. Repeat after me, therefore: We have one another.

Third, we have the Spirit.

The Spirit gives us wisdom to learn from our mistakes instead of wallowing in our regret. One of the best lessons I've ever learned in life is that when we regret, that reflects a certain kind of maturity that we have gained since we took the action we regretted. Do you know that after preaching to the Athenians, Paul never returned? He didn't ruminate on how few he brought to Jesus Christ that day. The Spirit simply led him in a different direction. It gave him wisdom or insight that his efforts were better spent elsewhere.

So repeat after me; when it comes to wisdom and reflection, "We have the Spirit."

And finally, and this is most important, we have a God of second chances.

I love what Martin Luther says about baptism. In the *Small Catechism*, he writes, "Baptism signifies that the old person in us, with all its sins and desires, (and we might add failures and regrets,) is to be drowned and die through daily sorrow for sin and through repentance; and on the other hand, that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever."

Repeat now after me: "We have a God of second chances."

Dear Friends in Christ, Jesus and Paul experienced the same emotions we do. They knew frustration and anxiety, and they knew despair as well as arguably, regret. But that did not stop them, and it need not stop you. This morning, I invite you to give one regret you have to God; one regret you have, minor or major, to God.

And then I ask you to receive this blessing: For whatever regret you have, may God grant you consolation, knowing that you are not alone.

For whatever regret you have, may God grant you wisdom, knowing that you can learn from your mistakes and take a different path, as Paul did next time.

And for whatever regret you have, may God grant you encouragement, knowing that your God, and mine, is a God of second chances, and that each day, every day, you and I are a new creation in Jesus Christ.

May God indeed grant you the power to persevere.

And all God's people said. "Amen."