WHEN EVERYTHING IS TAKEN AWAY
May 10, 2020 Mother’s Day --I Corinthians 13: 1-13
The Church of the Covenant

Mother’s Day Is strange when your Mother is no longer here. It is experienced mostly as loss when she has been taken away and gone to be with God. And the strange parallel I think right now is that we are all going through losses during this Covid-19 pandemic; over the past two months there is much we do not have right now that we used to have; we are in a time where experiences and material things and even the ability to travel and move about have been taken away. We cannot attend church; even this has been taken away. And all of these losses taken cumulatively force us to ask ourselves ultimate questions; questions about ultimate matters in our life; requiring a degree of self-reflection that we often do not have. And often flee from. So beloved, what happens when everything is taken away?

With very few church meetings in the evening it has provided me with time to sort through my basement and garage that is filled to overflow with my parent’s things. A lot of time to think can be good and it can be bad. I’m one step away from being the cat lady walking through a maze of boxes and furniture piled to the ceiling. I’m an episode for the cable show Horders in the making. So I am sorting through literally thousands of letters and cards; finding things like my Dad’s high school yearbook; letters he wrote home during World War II; my Grandmother Broberg’s death certificate and funeral service from 1971; a journal my Mother had written that is so loving and precious and includes me on every page, a journal I never knew existed and now I have read. I have found the special crystal serving dishes used for Thanksgiving each year, you know, the one that held the black olives and carrots and celery sticks, and now packed away for the City Mission. Each piece of furniture holds memories of another time. I’ll find little notes in the drawers that make me smile and make me cry. Each photograph reminds me of things which are no more and times that will not be again. It is the sorting out and giving away and releasing of all that has passed. What happens when everything is taken away?

During this time of sheltering in place I think we are all experiencing this as loss, in greater or lesser degrees, as things in our life have been taken away, we’re experiencing this as loss. If you’re feeling this way, then this is a sermon for you…

The Apostle Paul writes in Philippians 4: 11, I have learned the secret. “I have learned whatever state I am in to be content. I know how to be abased and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.” (Philippians 4: 11-12) When everything for the Apostle has been taken away, it is then he has learned the secret. It is then he has learned the true secret of contentment in life. Whether he is sheltering in place and cannot find toilet paper anywhere, whether he has lost his job and not yet received his stimulus check in the mail, whether he is worrying about the health of his loved ones, whether he is persecuted and thrown into jail for his faith, whether indeed he is even killed for what he believes he is nevertheless content. Because he has learned that it is not the outward circumstances in life that make him happy, material things and every sort of titulation and experience doesn’t make him content, only the Lord Jesus Christ suffices. Only Jesus is enough and is his sufficiency. The Lord is his portion in abasement and loss and in abundance and gain. Whatever life throws at him he is content. Whatever his lot, he has learned the secret. When all is taken away…O Christian, have you learned the secret??????

A kind member of our congregation dropped off some food the other day. It was very thoughtful and kind. The food was excellent but what was best about it was the thought and the caring and the time it took to do something nice for someone. You know, in ordinary times I would have appreciated it. But in this time of loss where so much has been taken away, I found myself deeply moved by this kindness. I have learned when I am abased by chicken every night I cook for myself to appreciate people’s kindnesses all the more. By the way, anyone who is listening to this broadcast who doesn’t have a loving church family like ours better figure out what’s truly important right now and join a church, any church, and become part of the
family. I take a walk almost every day now. Because I am not hurried as I walk, not trying to get it done quickly, not trying to get a certain distance accomplished in a certain time, I saw my neighbor across the street working in his yard and I stopped to speak with him (at a proper social distance, mind you). He and his wife had moved in six months before, they have a little daughter and his wife is pregnant with a son, due in August. I realized that although he lived right across the street for 6 months that this was the very first time I had met him. Sad, really. Too busy to be neighborly. My talk with him was good for my soul. I had a wonderful talk with a member of our church over the phone. And at one point she said, “Well, I know you are so busy…” and began the polite way of ending a phone call. Yes, ordinarily I would have had at least two church meetings that evening. But I felt she really wanted to speak more and so I sort of intimated that it was alright to continue the conversation. And then we had a REALLY wonderful conversation that I would have missed if I were too busy and unfocused. I prayed for her and then at the end she stopped me and then she prayed for me. I was deeply touched and moved by that. It is a rare person who pastors the pastor.

I have come away from this time of confinement and sheltering in place being grateful to God. I am grateful to God that He is teaching me what is truly important in life. I am grateful to Him to be content with small things, kindnesses, acts of generosity, neighbors, short walks, people with big hearts, gestures of faith that make a difference but that I might have missed or not even seen 8 weeks ago. I am grateful for the parents I had and all the many gifts of themselves they gave me; not as sad for the life I no longer have. I am more able to smile as I remember and release them more and more into the arms of a loving God. I am grateful for a roof over my head, and pork chops instead of chicken when Giant Eagle was out of chicken. I am discovering and learning and being reminded by God what makes for happiness and contentment. I am blessed by a loving congregation. I have great friends and a wonderful family. I am strengthened by the fact that the Lord is my portion and the Lord is enough for me. God is teaching me and I am learning the secret of whatever state I am in to be content. Only took me 65 years. I guess I am a slow learner…

And I pray for you all, as well. I think of you being at home, some alone, others with their family, but always surrounded by God’s love. I pray all the time that no one in this congregation I love will get sick; that everything that the locusts have eaten away will be restored by God tenfold. But that when this CoronaVirus is over that we will be different people, more grateful for smaller things, filled with love and gratitude to the Lord, taking time for others, taking time for God, not so much consumed by the things of this world that soon are gone and are dust in the wind and frankly bore us so quickly and never satisfy nor make us content. I pray we will not fill our schedules with so many meaningless activities that we cannot be content in life.

I think of a young family sheltering in place at home right now. Their children are always there. Their spouse is always there. Relentless. I’m sure there are frustrations and cabin fever and days when the stress of this time get the best of us. O, but your children, Biffy and Buffy and Muffy, are in their glory. Because in truth they really don’t want all those things you enroll them in and give them –not piano lessons, nor midget soccer, nor ballet lessons, nor all the things we think we are to have them do and to train them to be so busy that they cannot ever enjoy their life. Perhaps over the past 8 weeks you have figured out by now, that what they really want is just to be with you, with their parents who love them, and now are teaching them what they have learned about the secret to contentment in life.

On this Mother’s Day how I wish my precious Mother were still here. How I miss her today. How I feel her absence and loss. But how grateful I am today for everything I learned from her, from the grace in the time I was able to spend with her, for the way she always took time just to be with me, for her favorite Bible verse I always quote to myself when I miss her most. “So faith, and hope and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” (I Corinthians 13: 13) Beloved, when all else is taken away it is then we know that indeed….LOVE ABIDES… In the power of Jesus’ name, express that LOVE to someone today. Amen and Amen.

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IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!