

“SOUL FOOD” : Ascension Sunday - 2<sup>nd</sup> Presbyterian Church, Petersburg: May 21,2023

John 17:1-11 (selected)

I Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11

How to reconcile powerful/disturbing passages?

John 17- Jesus' plea for protection for humankind- as sanctification - to be as One

And I Peter- warning “not to be surprised at the fiery ordeal coming...to test you”

Surely are these not most dramatic “ups and downs” ever heard? From imagining angelic glory to the horrific thought of being eaten alive- by a prowling devil who lies in wait

Ups and Downs indeed.

Peanuts cartoon: with Lucy, looking sad, comments to Charlie Brown, “sometimes I get discouraged”

CB replies, “well, Lucy, life does have its ups and downs, you know.”

Lucy: “but why? Why should it? Why can't my life be all ups? If I want all ups, why can't I have them?”

Why can't I move from one up to another up? Why can't I go from an up to an “upper up”? I don't want any downs! I just want ups, and ups and ups!!

CB- walking away, head down, “good grief”

Perhaps insightful, as we all (somehow) wish for, even pray for... our steadfast [or not so steadfast] Faith to be “rewarded” with... goodness and mercy, to follow us, all the days of our lives.

It just seems... well, right, doesn't it?

In my life and long career as a pediatric surgeon, I have witnessed (and been part of) many tragic and heart-breaking stories: newborn babies with crippling birth defects, healthy toddlers with a simple ailment or some test that uncovered a malignant tumor/cancer, or a tragic accident that would change a young person's (and their family's) life forever

How to make sense of it? I cannot.

One doesn't have to understand suffering at all- just be willing to ACCEPT it! That's the HARD truth, isn't it?

As the reading from I Peter says, "Cast all your anxiety on him, because He cares for you."

How powerfully reassuring I find it to realize that "I am not in charge" here

In fact, my being here today is one example of that "sometimes painful" lesson.

4 yo with GSW to chest, CPR with open heart massage, resident's tears- seminary.

Constantly reminded of Gods "sense of humor" in (relentlessly) calling me thru sleepless nights, to stand here before you, unworthy as I am to do so.

Romans 8:28

"We know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them"

Does NOT say, God makes everything work out "the way I want", or even "the way I think it should"- simply because, well- "it's just not fair" otherwise.

God CAUSES, because He is the Grand Designer of EVERYTHING. History is His unique story- for EVERYTHING. Even the BAD things, those mistakes, secret sins, hurts- including our debts, divorces and diseases, to "come together" in His Purpose.. for our own GOOD!

What is our role in this process... ACCEPTANCE, with assurance...

For God has a purpose behind every problem, and we are "**transformed by trouble.**" [repeat]

God uses his Word, people and circumstances to change us, perhaps, eventually, even mold us, into the persons He wants us to become- Christlike in character.

We are like rough jewels, shaped by the hammer and chisel of adversity into the finished gems God want us to be. To become strong in Spirit, and then use that strength in service to Him.

I recall many lectures and discussions on nutrition as a critical part of wound healing during my surgical training, but one mentor's maxim particularly sticks in my mind, "You are what you eat"

Simple, graphic... easily understood, and good advice for all of us today, so diet and health -conscious, at any age.

But what concern do many of us have in our daily routine for the aspect of our health often overlooked- our Spiritual Health?

And how might can we go about nourishing our spiritual lives to keep them vigorous?

## SOUL FOOD

I grew up in the rural country of Southside Va, in Halifax County; my grandfather had a small family farm where all the aunts and uncles, and lots of cousins would assemble after church most Sundays, or on other special occasions; the kids would play with the farm animals, swim in a nearby creek or get into assorted mischief – but never far from the dinner call- "back home cooking, soul food" ( fried chicken, garden fresh vegetables, my favorite banana pudding) was a special treat then, and still is for me now, though rarely found, and never on par with those childhood memories I cherish.

Rather, I'm talking about feeding your soul/Faith through constant, conscious patterns – beginning with a change in attitude, augmented through study and with daily practice. Constantly.

Proverbs [23:7] "For as he [she] thinketh in his heart, so is he."

Romans 12:2b "Let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think."

For our thoughts become our words; words become actions; actions become habits; and habits become our character.

Philippians 4:8 says, "finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable- if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things"

What do you think about, all day long?

Language that is not noble...

Images that are not pure, enticements that are not true, or not beneficial?

The world around us is constantly intruding- dinner plans, a shiny new car, sharp outfit, or person...

Stuff we need to "sort out" of our mental processes - the degrading, vulgar, or just petty gossip.

How?

Through books that inspire

Music that uplifts

Friends and conversation that seeks to uphold virtuous ideals

Soul Food.

After all, if our bodies require wholesome nourishment for good physical health (rather than trash from the dumpster), should not our minds/souls deserve the same?

In I Timothy 4:7-8, the Apostle Paul offers this advice: "train yourself to be godly, for physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life, and for the life to come."

Like that physical training, which requires commitment over time, spiritual training does likewise, with dedicated study, daily prayer and mature contemplation.

Colossians [2:7] tells us to "let your roots grow down into Christ and draw nourishment from Him. See that you go on growing in the Lord, and become strong and vigorous in the truth."

Story of marathon training sessions- Boston marathon 2006.

Finish line with church banner on Boylston St visible for the final agonizing mile, from Isaiah 40.

“But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary”

And then be prepared to be amazed at what happens next!

Story of Buffalo Bills MNF game last Fall, injured player on field (left for bathroom break) on return, shocked to see a ring of players, from both teams kneeling in circle surrounding Damar Hamlin, CPR ongoing, heads bowed, praying...

In the raw tragedy of that moment, when there was simply nothing else to do, players, announcers and fans, all bowed heads and prayed, unapologetically...

Wasn't it ironic that only 5 years earlier, a high school football coach in Texas had been fired for encouraging players (on both teams) to voluntarily pray on the field before games?

There was nothing else to do... in times when no other words, or deeds were adequate, the casual murmuring of “thoughts and prayers” from public figures and announcers turned to just PRAYERS, and the relief offered from that visible expression of Soul Food, was palpable. It left us, then and now, to see God's Miracle of Grace in evidence (and later, also healing, as he recovered completely).

That same Miracle of Grace was carried out by Jesus, with 5 simple loaves and 3 fishes. But now, He is using our hands for its distribution, to be passed out to a broken and hurting world hungry for the real Soul Food, the Bread of Life that only He can provide. And, in doing so, we are together comforted that “all will be well”, even in the “ups and downs” of this mortal life.

TBTG.