

Our reading of 2 Corinthians continues with Paul offering encouragement to the church to get them through adversity. He says that affliction is temporary, but glory is eternal, and that we walk by faith, not by sight, which allows us to persist in living faithfully. Christians, says Paul, are playing the long game.

Now, I recently heard someone use that phrase, “playing the long game,” and it wasn’t a role model for us—but maybe kinda. Tom and I watched both seasons of “Daredevil,” and I’m not proud of it, but we did. The villain in the first season is a wealthy capitalist who accomplishes his nefarious goals by pulling financial strings, a very satisfactory villain from my point of view. At the end of the season he is gratifyingly put in prison, and Season Two introduces a couple of new villains. Imagine my surprise, then, when Villain #1 suddenly popped up again, pulling strings from prison, and arranging assassinations in his cell block. The guy whom he manipulated into doing some of the killing asks him why he didn’t do it himself—so much faster and easier; the villain replies that he’s playing a long game, and it wouldn’t serve his long-term interests to be so directly responsible for murder. He has a very clear idea of what his goals are and who he is, and in order to get there eventually he has to defer gratification right now, doing things in a roundabout way.

Well, that’s *kind of* what Paul’s telling the Corinthians. We walk by faith, not by sight, so we don’t do what seems immediately necessary. We live in an anxious time, a time when people are driven by fear. This strident insistence on the second amendment, with proposals for looser restrictions on concealed carry and lower ages for gun use—this is recent. You didn’t hear this so much before we elected an African American president with a foreign-sounding name. The harsh inhospitality

toward refugees and immigrants contrasts with the eager generosity of Robert Ray's Iowa in the 1970s, when we welcomed Vietnamese immigrants and gave them more than two months to get fully integrated into society. The current rhetoric about Muslims—bloodthirsty, aggressive, secretive--sounds like what medieval Christians used to accuse the Jews of back in the Dark Ages. But people see fear in others, and they take it on board and internalize it, till fear is the water in which we swim.

We walk by faith, and *not* by sight. We see all the reasons to be afraid, and to attack before we're attacked, but we're playing the long game. "Even though our outer nature is wasting away," says Paul, "our inner nature is being renewed day by day." That is, when we are experiencing the greatest difficulty, that's when we rely on the grace and strength of God. That's why I wanted to play James Cleveland singing "I Don't Feel Noways Tired," because just the way he and his audience sing it together, you know that they've lived that story.

I've been friendless (I don't believe),  
But God brought me (He brought me this far).  
I've been lonely (I don't believe),  
But God brought me (He brought me this far).  
I don't believe God brought me this far to leave me.

"I don't mind the pitfalls, because every time I get to one, he's right there."

Oh, the pitfalls. A couple months ago I talked about hearing Paul Engler, originally of Des Moines, talk about his new book, *This Is An Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt is Shaping the Twenty-First Century*. He cites a social movement trainer named Bill Moyer (not Moyers), who says that after a whirlwind's flurry of activity dies down, movements predictably experience a "Perception of Failure." It's the time after huge, inspirational actions have gotten lots of attention and new

converts, and then energy ebbs, and the short-term goal the movement had targeted has not been accomplished. The media reports that because protests have dropped off, the movement is dead and has accomplished nothing. But Moyer says that movements succeed over the long haul, even if they fail in the short run, when they win over greater levels of public support for their cause and undermine the pillars of support. This is how marriage equality was won, even though the Defense of Marriage Act was passed in 1996, looking a lot like a defeat for the cause.

I remember something similar, though on a smaller scale, my last year of divinity school, when the entire first semester was dominated by a strike by the clerical and technical workers at Yale University. This meant picket lines around every building, a scaled-back refectory, endless strategy meetings, classes moved off campus, hours on the picket line, broken friendships (think Hillary-Bernie), and even an arrest. It was exhilarating . . . and exhausting (more for the workers than for the students, but us too). It started in September, and when there was no sign of progress at Christmas break, I didn't know if I could come back and keep it up. However, the union organizers who weren't born yesterday had a plan. They would suspend the strike for the first two weeks of the spring semester to give everybody a taste of sweet normalcy, and plan to go back on strike unless there were such an outcry from the rest of the university community that the administration agreed to negotiate. Of course toward the end of the second week, the administration was hearing plenty about how this could not go on, and they sat down with the union and started to talk. Exhaustion has a place in social change too.

Paul Engler says of the cycle of whirlwind and discouragement that

**“If, in desperation, activists become ever more insular and isolated** from the wider public, then feelings of failure are warranted. But a movement that is building popular support need not worry if its initial moment in the spotlight passes . . . ‘The long-term impact of social movements,’ Moyer contends, ‘is more important than their immediate material success.’” (p. 195)

We are playing a long game, living out the reality of the kingdom of God.

While we are in this “earthly tent,” we groan under our burden, as Paul says; we sometimes see more failure than success. But Clarissa Pinkola Estes, in her *Letter to a Young Activist*, writes that we should learn the lesson of another circular thing, the deadly waterspout.

If you study the physics of a waterspout, you will see that the outer vortex whirls far more quickly than the inner one. To calm the storm means to quiet the outer layer, to cause it, by whatever countervailing means, to swirl much less, to more evenly match the velocity of the inner, far less volatile core — till whatever has been lifted into such a vicious funnel falls back to Earth, lays down, is peaceable again. One of the most important steps you can take to help calm the storm is to not allow yourself to be taken in a flurry of overwrought emotion or despair — thereby accidentally contributing to the swale and the swirl. Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach. . . . What is needed for dramatic change is an accumulation of acts — adding, adding to, adding more, continuing. We know that it does not take “everyone on Earth” to bring justice and peace, but only a small, determined group who will not give up during the first, second, or hundredth gale.

So we do not lose heart. A week and a half ago I showed excerpts from that old chestnut, “For the Bible Tells Me So,” the documentary about coming out stories. It’s ten years old now, and parts of it are dated, but I think it’s important still because of the documentation about teen suicide. I also played a radio debate from 2009 between two African American pastors, one open and affirming and the other not, and afterwards the first comment from the class was, “I’d rather go to [the

affirming one's] church!" At the end of class, one of the students paused to show me on her phone the trailer of a newer movie, "Pass the Light," about a gay Christian teen who runs for Congress against the incumbent who is using religion to divide people. The young man says, *"I saw the faith I love being used to hurt the people I cared about, and I couldn't stand by and do nothing."*

At one Kansas screening of the film, the creators sat near an exit in case their critics were proven right. What if audiences reacted horribly to the positive portrayal of two gay men and the message of inclusion? As it turned out, Goodwin says, those fears were unfounded: "The response was a standing ovation." Hawks says he doesn't expect the film to change people's beliefs, but it could help change the way they communicate. He hopes it will compel them to have "an ounce of openness" and to come from a place of love when it comes to subjects such as LGBT inclusion.

This movie is fiction, not documentary, but I don't think it could have been made ten years ago, when *For the Bible Tells Me So* was made. There's an audience for it now that was not there in 2006. The accumulation of acts by gentle and courageous people has advanced our public conversation about Christianity and sexuality. So we do not lose heart, because God has given us the Holy Spirit as a guarantee.

Let us pray:

Outrageous and patient God, we pray for the vision, grit and courage to play the long game. By countless acts of faith, may we make your kingdom evident to everyone, so that justice and peace are the norm, and fear no longer has power. Amen.