

March 24, 2019
1 Corinthians 10:5-13
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“Withstanding”

Good morning! It is great to be back in the pulpit at Creekside; last week Tim Morphew shared some wise words about how to act and live so that others will say that we are a lot like Jesus. That is the goal of spiritual growth and Christian formation. As Tim said, “who we follow will make all the difference of where we go.” I know that some others who are here have been traveling over the past week or so, so for anyone who could use a reminder, this is the third Sunday of Lent, and our theme is Growing in Grace [Slide 1] From now until Easter you will be hearing from the letters of Paul and his words to the early Christian churches about their Jewish heritage and message to the Gentiles about the grace of Jesus Christ and the gift of salvation which is for anyone who believes that Jesus is Lord.

The image that we are using for stability and growth is a tree: not this tree specifically, but any tree which is rooted and standing tall and branching out. But before we get into this text from 1 Corinthians and our tree imagery, I’ll ask you to indulge me for a bit. On March 3, I showed you some pictures of a desert, and what it looks like before and after a season of rain: I was preparing to go to Southern California with Tim to visit family and friends. I knew that they were having a wet spring, and was hoping to see wildflowers blooming. Some of you have been kind enough to ask how our time away was, and the answer is: It was spectacular. [Poppy 1 Slide] This is what California poppies look like close up. They really are this vivid an orange, and the sky really was that blue. We went with my mom and oldest brother and met my uncle and some cousins on this random hill on the road east of Lake Elsinore. We had this field almost to ourselves. Not so further up Interstate 15 [Poppy 2 Slide] where for a stretch of several miles it looked like someone had poured orange paint over the hills. I don’t think God could have chosen a better

color to show up on green hills than orange poppies. As some of you saw on national news, there were so many people jamming the exit off the interstate to see the poppies that city authorities had to close it temporarily last weekend. Locals were calling it the “poppy apocalypse” because of the impact on traffic and local businesses.

It is worth noting that these poppies, while they are spectacular, are a flash in the pan. They are wildflowers which grow on rocky hillsides. They are annuals which drop their seeds and wait -- often for years -- for enough water to germinate and bloom. They have no roots to speak of and are easily crushed -- especially when 150,000 people tramp through them -- and within another week or so, they will be gone. It was wonderful that our time in CA coincided with that super-bloom, but of course I was thinking about trees while I was there. There is nothing in nature which is constantly in bloom, but trees need to find ways to stay alive and continue to grow in every season - - in drought and flood and storm and cold -- whatever the conditions are.

In chapter 10 of Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth -- the one which we know as 1 Corinthians -- Paul is exploring the relationship of history and faith, and of testing and endurance and grace. He begins by talking about Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness: the Israelites were lost and God guided them with a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire; they were hungry and God gave them manna to eat; they were thirsty and God had Moses strike a rock which gushed forth with water for them to drink. Paul says that rock was Christ: that they were led and fed and nourished by grace. And yet . . . we read time after time in the Exodus account how the people of Israel whined and grumbled: murmuring is my favorite biblical word for this kind of complaining. We know, although Paul doesn’t mention it here, that the Israelites went beyond murmuring and actually donated their gold jewelry to Moses’ brother Aaron to create a golden calf -- an idol -- so the people would have *something* to worship because they couldn’t wait until Moses returned from his encounter with Yahweh on Mt. Sinai. The people were given grace and they chose evil instead. Some of the Corinthians were also making evil choices (one man was having sexual relations with his mother-in-law, which is *never* a good idea), and Paul is cautioning the Corinthians not to test Christ’s grace by intentionally making sinful choices. Claiming Christ’s grace does

not give us license to do whatever we want. In verse 12, Paul writes, "If you think you are standing, be careful that you do not fall." In other words, when we are the most confident in our own strength, when we are at our most self-righteous is the time when we are most vulnerable to sin and to cheapening the grace of Christ. Grace is free, but it comes at the cost of us actually changing the behaviors which dishonor God and dishonor ourselves or others as God's children.

I want to linger a bit on verse 13, because it is important: both for how it is used and how I believe it has been misused. It says, "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength." Well. I talked to someone this past week who referenced that verse; I've heard it from people who are hurting, fearful or grieving. Usually their sharing goes something like this: "I know God doesn't give us more than we can handle, but God must think I'm stronger than I think I am." In other words, "I don't know how I'm going to make it through this -- I hope God knows the way." That is a dark and desperate place to be -- at the end of our rope and not sure we have the strength, or maybe even the will, to keep hanging on -- but that is exactly where grace finds us. Hanging on is the opposite of the self-sufficiency and self-righteousness which has it all figured out and is just waiting for everyone else to see it the right way -- which just happens to be my way. I do not mean to minimize how terrible it is to feel like we are being tested beyond our strength, when we cannot imagine how we are going to face another day. I have been in that place and I know that some of you have too. We cannot appreciate the grace of those experiences until we are through them. Verse 13 ends with, "With the testing [God] will provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."

Just a note here: although I believe in the promise and the truth of this verse, it is not one to throw around lightly. If you know that some is experiencing terrible pain or loss, it is probably not the most helpful thing to say, "Well, God won't give you more than you can handle." This is especially true if you throw that out there in order to avoid the commitment of being emotionally present with them. Finding the grace to get through difficult life situations -- whether they are unavoidable disasters or self-inflicted disasters or some combination of those things -- getting through loss and pain is some of the most difficult work that any of us will ever do. We need God's

assurances and faithfulness to withstand them: don't cheapen that struggle by saying it will all work out and then walking away.

Paul mentions specifically how we need God in order to withstand the storms of life, but he doesn't mention something else which I believe is important: other people. Of course, other people can be the cause of our problems, but a healthy community of support and prayer and encouragement is invaluable. Another thing people say to me is, "I don't know how people get through an experience like this without a church family." I don't know either; what I do know is that friends and prayers held me at times when I was hurting the most, and helped me to heal and gave me the strength to go on. It's even better when you have nurtured and developed those relationships before the crisis hits. That's why I want to end with some reflections about trees.

[Forest Slide] Trees of the same species are often connected through their root systems, which share water and other nutrients. Robust roots allow trunks to be sturdy enough to support the enormous weight of branches. Think of how much more strength it takes to support weight which is at a distance to your body rather than right weight which is right next to your trunk. Anything which is rooted outdoors is going to face adverse conditions: maybe drought, perhaps a catastrophic storm. [Lightning Slide] Trees, like poppies or any other plant, need water from rain, but they can be damaged, snapped off, or uprooted by high winds. A tree which has other trees growing around it is much less susceptible to this kind of damage. I think I understand the physics of this, but the only way I can explain it is by using my hands. [Wind Damage Slide] The most destructive storm for a tree is a sustained forceful wind, which puts so much sustained pressure on the same part of the tree that it is likely to crack. Nearby trees, even if they are not in the directly path of the wind, help blunt the force of that storm. Maybe most significantly, these trees all have branches--and even leaves -- which snap back and move at different rates. This keeps the force of the wind from being one steady pressure, and breaks it up in different directions and eddies. That's why, if you look out at a group of trees in a storm they are tossing in different directions at varying speeds. In Psalm 29, the psalmist is describing a thunderstorm which comes across the mountains of Lebanon and says, "The voice of God causes the oaks to whirl." Trees *whirling* is a wonderful image of what it's like to

witness a storm, and maybe what it feels like when we are caught within an emotional or spiritual storm. Supportive people are not a substitute for God's grace, but they can help us weather a storm rather than being destroyed by it.

As we grow in grace, we develop roots and grow sturdy systems of support not only for ourselves, but for the community which we are a part of. For those of you have shared this morning about storms that are blowing for you or your family, God bless you. If you are carrying concerns but have not shared them aloud, God bless you. If you have offered a prayer or a kind word or a warm smile for someone else, God bless you. It may be your kindness which gives someone else the strength they need for the moment or for the day. In sunlight or in cyclone, may we all grow in the knowledge of Jesus Christ, who gives us the grace to withstand the storm. Amen.