

“Comfort One Another”
Sermon Series on
Becoming the Church that Jesus Longs For #6
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(2 Cor. 1:3-7)

Introduction.

What is your favorite comfort food? What food do you like to eat when you just want to reward yourself or simply satisfy a craving? Maybe your comfort food is something you like to eat which reminds you of home, something that mom used to cook?

Most of the time I try to eat healthy – lots of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, cut back on the red meat and eat more chicken and fish. But every once in a while, I feel the need for some comfort food. Lorie and I ate at the Camel City Barbeque Factory a week ago, and she ordered their mac-n-cheese. Mercy! It may just be the best tasting macaroni-n-cheese I’ve ever eaten. (Yes, I did sneak a bite!)

There are a lot of places here in Winston-Salem that serve good comfort food. I mean, we are in the heart of the South, aren’t?! But for me the ultimate place on the planet for great comfort food is served at a little hole-in-the-wall restaurant in Dallas, Texas, where Lorie and I lived for 9 years. It’s called Bubba’s. With a name like that, you figure they’re going to serve pretty good comfort food. And good it is! Fried chicken, mashed potatoes with cream gravy, green beans cooked with bacon, and home-made from scratch yeast rolls. Yummmmm! (Can I get a witness, Petey Crowder?!) And don’t forget to top off your meal with some of their cherry cobbler!

There are times in our lives when we just crave a little comfort food, don’t we? Food that reminds of us of home, or food we think will make us feel a little better. Like when we’re under stress, or we’ve just come through a difficult experience, or life has thrown us a curve ball that was hard to hit.

In times of stress or trouble it’s only natural to want a little comfort. One of the great promises in the Bible is that God is always there to provide for us not only the physical comfort of food but also the spiritual comfort of His Holy Spirit whenever we need it. But there is an additional gift the Lord gives to people to help them cope in times of trouble, and that’s the comfort of the body of Christ. That is the subject of my message today, and it’s part of what helps a congregation become the kind of church that Jesus longs for. Let’s take a closer look.

I. Our Need for Comfort.

In his book *Love One Another*, Jerry Sittser writes, “Sooner or later every person loses someone or something important. Every person is forced to reconsider expectations – a long and healthy life, a happy marriage, a successful career – that unfavorable circumstances dash to the ground. Grief is a school every person must enter.”¹

There are many ways you and I experience loss in life. It might be through the death of a loved one, or the miscarriage of an unborn child. It might be the loss of a job, or the death of a dream. Every loss produces a certain kind of grief with which we have to deal. In his book Jerry cites the sociologist Peter Berger who uses the term *anomie* – which literally means “disorder” – to describe the effect loss has on us. Suddenly we find ourselves on the edge of a cliff that plunges into oblivion, and we feel the ground shake, realizing we’re going to fall into an abyss below us. Loss creates anxiety, fear, bewilderment, and disorientation.²

Jerry says that grief plunges those who have suffered loss into a deep and terrible darkness. He writes that shortly after he lost his wife, mother, and youngest daughter in a tragic car accident, he had a dream. In that dream he was running west toward the sun, trying to catch what was gradually slipping away over the horizon.

Suddenly he stopped and glanced with a foreboding over his shoulder to the vast darkness that was closing in on him. He longed to keep running after the sun because he wanted to remain in the light, even though he knew it was futile. The next morning when he woke up, Jerry realized that the quickest way to reach the sun and the light of day was to head east and plunge into the darkness itself until he came to the sunrise.³

How do you deal with grief and loss? What’s the key to finding help in times of suffering and pain? I believe one key to this is found in the comfort which God can provide through the presence and the power of His Spirit.

II. God’s Gift of Comfort.

(SLIDE) In the opening verses of the first chapter of the book of 2 Corinthians, the apostle Paul writes, “*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles...*” (2 Cor. 1:3-4).

Typically, whenever Paul began a letter to one of the churches to whom he writes in the New Testament, he follows the salutation with words of thanksgiving and he requests prayer. Usually he expresses thanks for God’s grace that was evident in the lives of the people to whom he’s writing, and then he gives a summary of some prayer requests he would like to make of his readers (e.g. Phil. 1:3-11; Col. 1:3-12). However, in this passage the apostle starts off by offering

praise to God for personally consoling and encouraging him, and it's only later in the letter that Paul solicits prayer.

This atypical preoccupation with his own circumstances shows just how distressing the experience in Asia was from which Paul had recently been delivered (vv. 8-10). In these opening verses Paul goes on to highlight the character of God which he had come to value more and more in a deeper way as a result of his own personal need and God's divine response. The Lord's compassion was a never-ending comfort to the apostle Paul.

Last week I introduced you to the Greek word *parakaleo*, and I explained that it can be translated in a variety of ways. It all depends on the context in which the word is used in Scripture. Sometimes it's translated "encourage," as it was in the passage we considered last week in 1 Thessalonians 5. Other times it is translated "to come alongside, to help, or to comfort." That's what it means here in our text.

Last week I also reminded you that Jesus promised His disciples He would send them a "Comforter," the Holy Spirit, to come and be with them when He left and returned to His heavenly Father. In John 14 Jesus called the Holy Spirit the *Parakletos*, the Comforter of God, and Jesus said He would send that Comforter to be with us.

Are you in a place of pain this morning? Have you been in a season of suffering and struggle? Look to the Lord, and call on His name. God will send His Holy Spirit to comfort you. And remember, Jesus promised in Scripture, "*I will never leave you nor forsake you.*" As my friend Jim Singleton said to me yesterday, "God isn't going to lead you to it, if He wasn't going to take you through it!" On that we can rely.

However, the comfort God offers to give us isn't just through His Spirit. The Lord also provides comfort through the church which is the body of Christ.

III. A Community of Comfort.

The Greek word *parakaleo* appears 59 times in the entire New Testament, but 29 of those appearances are in the book of 2 Corinthians alone. And we see a good many of them here in these opening verses of chapter 1.

In this passage the apostle Paul writes, "*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort*" (1:3-7).

What Paul describes here is a community of comfort, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit is intended by God to be extended through the body of Christ. Believers become conduits, and those who have been comforted by God themselves “pay it forward”, so to speak, in order to help other people the way God has helped them. And when the church is functioning at its best, there is simply no community on earth that can rival its ability to comfort.

There are many ways the followers of Christ can comfort people who are hurting. For example, there is *the gift of understanding*. People who are suffering welcome a visit if it comes without too many words and the person doesn't try to offer too much advice. In addition, whatever invitations are extended should not come with too much pressure to accept. What hurting people often need the most is understanding.

Another way the body of Christ can provide comfort is through *the ministry of presence*. There was a little boy who lived next door to an elderly couple. Sadly, the neighbor lost his wife. A few days after the funeral, the little boy saw the older man in his backyard, and he went over to see his neighbor. The boy climb into the old man's lap, and he just sat there. When the boy came home, his mother asked him what he said to his neighbor. And the little boy said, “I didn't say anything. I just helped him cry.” That's the ministry of presence.

Offering *practical help* is another way to comfort a person who has experienced loss. Lawns mowed, leaves raked, meals provided, babysitting offered, and plumbing problems fixed are all practical ways you can comfort someone who is hurting. Jerry writes in his book about a woman who was widowed with two young boys. At first she was incapable of carrying out her many responsibilities. Friends and relatives provided meals for the family. A neighbor took care of her kids. A good friend helped her with her financial affairs, and her husband's boss spent time with her sons. That's providing comfort in practical ways.

A final way we can provide comfort is to *offer hope*. Jerry says that good comforters remind people of the hope of the Gospel which proclaims that sin is forgiven, death is defeated, and eternal life is ours in Christ. Easter tells us that the story isn't finished being written, and the last chapter of the story is going to be wonderful.

What sets the Christian community apart is not the absence of suffering but hope in suffering. It is for this reason that at the end of his letter in chapter 15, the apostle Paul urged his readers to comfort one another with the assurance that, though we grieve as the world does when someone dies, we grieve in the hope that death will not have the final word. The resurrection will! And as the first fruits of the new creation, Jesus has already gone before us to show us the way to eternal life. It's through Him.

There are a hundred ways you can I can be the hands and feet of Jesus to people in times of suffering and pain, and I'm so proud of this congregation for the many ways you do this with such faithfulness. Lorie and I have personally experienced your kindness and care, and my hope is that everyone in our congregation might experience that same love and sacrifice which we have.

Have you ever thought about the fact that whenever you and I go through an experience of suffering, God is actually using it to grow us and to prepare us? There is a redemptive quality to suffering. The Lord takes the hardships of our lives, and he uses them in His school of discipleship to chip away our rough edges, to deepen our character, and to draw us closer into His heart of love. It is through the comfort of God's Holy Spirit that God grows and develops me as a follower of Christ.

However, God not only uses these painful experiences to grow us; He also uses them to prepare us. The Lord takes the awful pain of our suffering, and He uses it to equip us to become His hands and feet to comfort others. It is the means by which Christ develops our capacity to care and prepares us to be conduits of His compassion for hurting people. "...so that," as Paul writes, "*we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God*" (2 Cor. 1:4b).

Conclusion.

There was a little girl who was awakened one night by a thunderstorm, and she rushed into the bedroom of her parents and complained that she was frightened. The girl's mother comforted her daughter and then walked her back to her room. And as the mother tucked her little girl into bed she said, "Now, honey, don't worry about the storm. God will be with you." No sooner had the mother settled back into her own bed that a loud clap of thunder roused the girl again, and she bolted into her parents' bedroom once more. And when her mother tried to remind her daughter of the comfort of God's presence, the little girl answered, "I know, mommy. But right now I want God with skin on!"

The body of Christ is made up of people who can be God with skin on, and you and I have a wonderful opportunity to be conduits of the compassion and care of Jesus. Many of you have met my friend Trevor Smith. He is the senior pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Charlotte. Trevor and I met in seminary, and we've been in a covenant group all these years. One of the great blessings in coming to Winston-Salem is being close to Trevor and to Allan Poole, who is also in our covenant group.

Many years ago, Trevor lost his son in a tragic accident during Colin's freshman year at William and Mary, Trevor's alma mater. Colin was riding his bike to class early one morning when the driver of a garbage truck didn't see the

young man on his bike, and he accidentally ran over Colin. The young man died instantly. It was a devastating loss for Trevor and his family, as you can imagine.

Allan Poole and I, along with the fourth member of our covenant group, Paul Parsons, flew to Stillman Valley, Illinois, where Trevor was serving a church at the time. We just wanted to be with our friend in his time of grief and loss.

The day after the funeral, we were all sitting around the kitchen table when a theological debate arose in which we began to discuss whether or not Paul was being autobiographical in Romans 7 when we wrote about his struggle with sin. (When pastors get together, they argue about things like that. I know. We're odd people.) Trevor and I were on one side of the debate, and Allan and Paul were on the other.

The debate intensified in a funny sort of way, and we raised our voices to make our points more forcefully. Eventually we got so tickled with one another, and all of us were doubled over in laughter. It was a light moment during an otherwise sad and heavy weekend.

Trevor still talks about that day all these years later, and he says, "It was the first time after Colin's death that laughter was heard in our house. And it was just what we needed." Trevor's daughter Kathleen still talks about that moment too. She had never seen her dad laugh so hard.

Who do you need to comfort today? What person do you know needs compassion and care? How will you be a conduit of the Holy Spirit to them and become the hands and feet of Jesus this week? *"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God" (2 Cor. 1:3,4). Amen.*

¹ Jerry Sittser, *Love One Another*, p. 116.

²*Ibid*, p. 121.

³*Ibid*, p. 122.