

“The Love of Christ Urges Us On”
2 Corinthians 5:6–10, 14–17
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I know there are not many Wildcat fans in ACC territory, it’s difficult to sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land, but try to set aside fan loyalties for a moment and consider the human elements of this story.

John Schlarman was the offensive line coach at the University of Kentucky from 2012 to 2020, the year he died at the age of forty-five. During his tenure, UK’s line built a reputation for being one of the best in the college football, which for a mediocre team at best, was quite an accomplishment. The Big Blue Wall they came to be called, and it was all because of Schlarman.

He played on the line at UK, and he was a great teacher, but he also showed up every day while fighting cholangiocarcinoma, a rare kind of cancer that forms in the bile ducts. His drive, passion, and perseverance through every phase of the illness and treatment was a source of encouragement for his linemen. His very presence urged them on to do better. For how do you complain about being tired or hold back because you are sore when your coach is putting everything on the line for you every day while fighting an illness that would take his life?

If you just can’t get past the Wildcat component of this story, consider the family members you have had who motivated you in similar ways, by making sacrifices for you. I spent most of my first six years of life with just my mother or with my grandparents because of my parents’ divorce. All three of them made sacrifices for me and thus inspired me to make something of my life. On this Father’s Day, many of us will think of fathers who gave much to us and for us — at home, in their work, in military service. They helped us in specific ways, but they also inspired us by their example to be willing to give something to others. We have all had someone who encouraged us in this way.

In our reading today, the Apostle Paul tells the church at Corinth that Jesus is that person in his life. “For the love of Christ urges us on,”

he says, “And he died for all so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.” The love of Christ urges us on, sacrificial love, love willing to lay down life.

Christ’s love provides Paul all the motivation he needs to persevere through the hardships he experiences because of his faith — ridicule, rejection, beatings, imprisonment, and in the end, death. It is a lot for a person to tolerate and endure, much less choose, but given what Christ has done for him, Paul simply cannot quit living out his calling to tell people about Jesus, no matter what hardship it might bring.

Christ’s love *urges him on*, in the NRSV, or *compels him* in the NIV. “Compels” is a strong word, but Paul is not talking about being coerced. He is saying that Jesus’ sacrificial love leaves him unable to make any other choice but to follow him in the way of sacrificial love. More than this, he is saying that Jesus’ sacrificial love leaves *us*, all of us, unable to make any other choice. The love of Christ urges us on.

It is a helpful word in light of the challenges we face. We need encouragement to overcome the sense of hopelessness we often feel for different reasons, beginning with our own struggles and self-doubts. In the realm of struggles, we experience failure, disappointment, and an array of health challenges, but our awareness of the love of God’s love in Christ can strengthen us through them all.

Mark Barger Elliott writes about a remarkable woman he knew who suffered for over fifteen years with ovarian cancer. When asked why she continued to believe in God, she said if she looked really hard, she could sense God’s presence, even in the exhausting chemotherapy treatments and endless oncologist visits (*Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 3, p. 135). We too can sense God’s presence and love and thus find the strength we need to continue.

In the realm of self-doubts, we have plenty of them too. There are tremendous needs in the world around us, ranging from poverty and violence to fear and division. Who are we to think we can do anything to make a difference? And yet, God creates each of us in love and for a purpose, and Christ’s sacrifice suggests that there is something worth dying for in each of our lives, something noble and lofty. Reflecting on

his calling to ministry, Norwegian monk Erik Varden once said, “God in his providence has seen something in me I had not noticed (referenced by Brad Roth in *The Christian Century*, June 2024, p. 27).”

God sees something in each of us worthy of praise, useful in God’s realm, and God not only calls us to use it, God encourages us to do so through the ever-abiding love of Christ that persists through all the questions and doubts we develop. In the film “The Count of Montecristo” Edmond Dantes is imprisoned on false charges of treason fabricated by someone he thought was a friend. Yearning for revenge and frustrated at his inability to get out of prison, Dantes has a fascinating exchange with a priest who is also imprisoned.

Abbe Faria says, “Here is your final lesson — do not commit the crime for which you now serve the sentence. God said, ‘Vengeance is mine.’” Dantes replies, “I don’t believe in God.” “It doesn’t matter,” the priest says, “He believes in you.” So it goes for all of us. God believes in us, even when don’t believe in God or ourselves. And God’s belief serves as a source of encouragement, empowerment to keep going, despite all our self-doubts.

But it is not just personal struggles and self-doubts that challenge us. It is the world in which we live. Like the Apostle Paul 2,000 years ago, in seeking to live out our faith, we meet resistance in the world around us. Part of this is found in the cultural tendency to reject any form of organized religion, if not spirituality, but we have to take some of the blame for this.

The church has been so resistant to any new perspective that it is often woefully behind in embracing change. Just this week, the Southern Baptist Convention voted on a motion to disaffiliate all churches that affirm, appoint, or employ women as pastors. Though the motion didn’t pass — 61% of the messengers voted for it, but 66% was required — that the vote was taken says all we need to know. They have already removed some churches with female pastors, and they passed a resolution on the restriction of IVF.

Why aren’t young people interested in the church? Because it is so backward! Culturally right now, it is moving further

backward, and no matter how different we might be, whenever we seek to talk about who Jesus is to us, we meet all sorts of resistance. And like many things today, a few outlandish words get amplified on social media while words of sanity and substance get lost.

Early in my ministry, someone suggested that I might consider beginning a television ministry to offer something different about Christian faith than what was on TV then. “Something like ‘The voice of sanity’?” I suggested, and the person said, “Yes,” to which I replied, “Who are we kidding? No one would tune in.”

And yet, we cannot give up, the love of Christ urges us on, and the richness of life in Christ that still exists, the deep and profound meaning we find in our faith, the genuineness of community we find in churches like this, are all treasures to be shared, especially in this time when there is so much emptiness and isolation, so little truth and healthy connection. The love of Christ, God’s sacrificial love, motivates us to keep persevering in our witness.

This is a good thing not only because we meet resistance to organized religion, but because we meet resistance to Jesus’ way of life. Paul says our calling is to live not for ourselves but for the one who died and was raised for us. Jesus says our calling is to deny ourselves, take up a cross, and follow him in the ways of service and sacrificial love, peace and justice, healing and reconciliation. But these are not the ways of the world or too often even the church.

We can do some simple things to help others in need without much trouble, like working in our clothing ministry or volunteering at a Rise Against Hunger event. But if we advocate for affordable housing, while many people will be with us, those who live near where such housing might be or those who build other kinds of housing will not. If we volunteer at Welcome House to help immigrants and refugees, while we may receive thanks from those we help, we might receive something else from those who think we are letting too many of *these people* into our country.

If we seek to embrace those on the margins of our culture — people who have been incarcerated, LGBT people, Muslims, and

others — while we will have the reward of knowing we are doing God’s work, we will quite possibly receive verbal assaults, demonization, and threats of worse. Resistance is a part of life, especially life lived after the example of Christ. But he never shied away from resistance, but rather turned toward it. And as Paul notes, with the weight of his own experience behind the claim, the love of Christ urges us on when we are doing Christ’s work.

In his book *The Active Life* Parker Palmer tells a story about an experience he had in his early forties with an Outward Bound course (pp. 32-33). He was asked to confront his worst fear when a gossamer strand was hooked to a harness around his body and he was told to make his way down a 110-foot cliff by leaning out over God’s emptiness and walking down the face of that cliff to the ground eleven stories below. Just saying this much, I can sense the moist feet and hands of many acrophobes in the room...

Well, not leaning back enough, due to fear, Palmer dropped awkwardly to a first ledge. His instructor observed astutely, “I don’t think you have it yet. You’re leaning too close to the rock face.” Her advice went against his instincts, but he tried to lean back a little more only to drop awkwardly to the next ledge. “You still don’t have it,” said the ever-observant instructor, “Try again.”

He did, leaning back farther, and to his amazement, moved down more smoothly until he saw a hole in the cliff approaching and panicked. “Is anything wrong, Parker?” the instructor asked. And with a childlike voice, unrecognizable to him, Palmer said, “I don’t want to talk about it.” So, she replied, “I think it’s time you learned the Outward Bound Motto.” Great, he thought, I’m about to die and she offers a pithy saying! But then she said, “If you can’t get out of it, get into it.” Bone-deep he knew there was no way out of this situation but to go deeper into it, and slowly his feet began to move.

It is not a bad motto for life or Christian faith — if we can’t get out of it, we might as well get into it. The faithful can’t get out of our calling to follow Jesus, so we might as well throw ourselves into it fully, ever trusting that Christ’s love will urge us on,

encourage us, and strengthen us no matter how difficult the journey becomes.