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New Living Translation: John 16:33

"I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."

A place of joy and spiritual regeneration.

Let's talk about growing this church.

But first - when I was in graduate school, many years ago, I drove to Mexico with my father. My father was going to retire soon, and he had picked up a hobby for the first time in his life: photography. This had its good points and its bad points. First, my father was happy, driving up and down the coast of California, with my mother, taking photographs. But second, my old bedroom had been transformed into a huge library of prints and slides, stacks and stacks of them. This just before the advent of digital cameras. When I visited my parents, I ended up sleeping in the living room. We were in Mexico so that he could take some pictures and so that I could take a break from very intense studies. We had a great time. But on the way back into the U.S. we ran into a bit of trouble. Back then, you didn't need a passport to get entry into the U.S. A driver's license from one of the states was good enough. I was driving my old Toyota beater when we

stopped at the border crossing to re-enter the U.S. I was reaching for my license when the officer motioned for me to roll down my window. I obeyed. He looked at me, then over at my father. My dad was half Portuguese or half Brazilian, I'm actually not sure which. But he had straight black hair and skin that darkened in the summer sun. "Where did you find this guy?" asked the officer suspiciously. I knew what was going on – and I have to admit that I was tempted to crack a joke, like "Oh, he is just a hitchhiker. He asked me to say that he was my father." But I knew that things could get out of hand quickly if I did that. The officer then ordered my father out of the car. It was then that my dad leaned over and said to me softly, "I forgot my driver's license."

Let's look at a passage from 1st Samuel, Chapter 16. It's about Samuel picking a new king for the Israelites, as God was commanding him to do.

Now the LORD said to Samuel, "You have mourned long enough for Saul. I have rejected him as king of Israel, so fill your flask with olive oil and go to Bethlehem. Find a man named Jesse who lives there, for I have selected one of his sons to be my king."

² But Samuel asked, "How can I do that? If Saul hears about it, he will kill me."

"Take a heifer with you," the LORD replied, "and say that you have come to make a sacrifice to the LORD. ³ Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you which of his sons to anoint for me."

⁴ So Samuel did as the LORD instructed. When he arrived at Bethlehem, the elders of the town came trembling to meet him. "What's wrong?" they asked. "Do you come in peace?"

⁵ “Yes,” Samuel replied. “I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Purify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.” Then Samuel performed the purification rite for Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice, too.

⁶ When they arrived, Samuel took one look at Eliab and thought, “Surely this is the LORD’s anointed!”

⁷ But the LORD said to Samuel, “Don’t judge by his appearance or height, for I have rejected him. The LORD doesn’t see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”

Here’s a bit of background on Samuel. At the point when Samuel rises up in prominence as a prophet, the Israelite nation has become extremely corrupt. To restore order, God tells Samuel to anoint Saul as king of Israel. But Saul does not follow the laws of God, and so once again, Samuel is told by God to select a leader for Israel. Our passage begins with Samuel being nervous that Saul will be very unhappy when he learns that he is being replaced. But God had rejected Saul because Saul lacked faith and repentance, and so God wants to protect Samuel. God suggests that Samuel bring a heifer with him and pretend that he's just making a sacrifice to God, instead of going to Bethlehem to replace Saul. God gives Samuel some advice about judging people: *“Don’t judge by his appearance or height, for I have rejected him. The LORD doesn’t see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”* Interestingly, though, Samuel actually did end up picking a very handsome candidate – David. But the point is well made. People and God often use very

different criteria for judging people. We look upon some people with suspicion when God sees that they are in truth righteous and of high moral fiber.

Now consider something from the Gospel of John, near the end, Chapter 15, when Jesus is preparing the Apostles for life without him.

¹⁸ “If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first. ¹⁹ The world would love you as one of its own if you belonged to it, but you are no longer part of the world. I chose you to come out of the world, so it hates you.

Jesus will die soon, and he is doing his best to build up their faith because he knows they will face rejection, isolation, abandonment, and attempts at killing them. The Apostles are going to go out into the world to carry the Word – and Jesus is accepting the blame in advance for what will happen to them. Jesus was all about love for everyone and a commitment to living a life of good works, but his followers would be met with hatred, suspicion, and violence. As Jesus is commissioning the Apostles, he tells them: *“If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first.”* Christianity did spread quickly in a geographic sense, although the overall numbers stayed small for a long time. The Roman Empire stretched at its peak from what is now the British islands all the way to the north of Africa. There were roads connecting the empire, ships that moved people between far flung cities, and there was a common language. This allowed churches to be planted in cities all over the empire in a short period of time. But

Christianity was seen as a great threat, and initially, believers tended to be outsiders, folks who did not hold positions of power and respect. Persecution became a persistent and deadly threat, especially in the Roman Empire from about 64 to 313 AD. And throughout history, there have been many instances of persecution of Christians – right up to today. Indeed, the Middle East has become a very dangerous place for modern Christians.

Yet there was a period where Christians were very safe in the Roman Empire. A few hundred years after the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus, in the year 313, the Roman Emperor Constantine would decriminalize Christianity, making it no longer a crime to abandon the traditional Roman gods for the triune God of Christianity. Constantine himself was a Christian. What's interesting is that he waited until just before his death to be baptized; apparently, he thought that there was a one-time only opportunity to have your sins absolved at the moment you were baptized, and he wanted to sin all he could until the very end. Some put it in a more positive way, saying that he just wanted to minimize the opportunity for him to pollute his soul before going to be with God. But another Roman emperor, Theodosius, in 380 made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. This was the beginning of the harm caused by mixing state and religion. Eventually, the church became far too powerful and was guilty of great

offences. Indeed, in the centuries after the Roman Empire collapsed, Christianity, in the west, became very dominant, and it controlled the daily lives of millions of people. The dominance of Christianity lasted right up until modern times.

We have now come full circle. There are still countries with official state churches, including England and Greece. But we no longer believe in a government standing behind any church. In fact, we are, like the first Christians, a minority. We are portrayed in movies and on TV and in the news as being hurtful and ignorant, and of trying to force our beliefs on others. We are ridiculed and cursed. We must remember, however, that we are the inheritors of the teachings of Christianity, one of which is to do just what God told Samuel – to judge everyone equally, despite their appearance or other superficial characteristics. We know that many people today, all around us, hate us for our faith – just as Jesus predicted to the Apostles. That is why this church family - and thousands like it - are so important. We need to support each other in our faith. We must make it clear that Christianity is beautiful, that it teaches love and respect for all people, especially those who have been cast to the fringes of society.

There have been massive revivals in the past, and some say that we will have another one, that our faith will blossom again. There are those who point to what is often called the “southern” church, i.e., the church in the southern

hemisphere, including South America, parts of Asia, and Africa, where Christianity is healthy and growing rapidly. The United Methodist Church itself has been very successful itself in spreading the faith in Africa and the Philippines. Maybe our descendants will be introduced to the faith by missionaries from these countries. American might be re-Christianized. But still, many people wonder about Christianity in America and western Europe. Is it dying? Will we truly have a revival? Or will the church be much smaller in the future, but filled with far more dedicated believers? My feeling is to trust God. The result will be dictated by God – and the result will honor God. We don't have to worry about our faith. That's what it means to have faith, right? We must acknowledge that when things are left for humans to control, what we get is a horrific, sadistic mess, like much of what we see in the world today. So, we hand control over to God. We know that God has an ending that has already been decided, already orchestrated to reflect the teachings of universal love. As Jesus was preparing the Apostles for his departure, he said this, from the Gospel of John: *"I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."*

So, what about my father? We were trying to drive from Mexico to California. My father had forgotten his ID – and he looked an awful lot like a

Mexican. He even spoke Spanish, which he learned from employees that he had hired in his job as the manager of a garage and tire shop. But I assure you, he didn't launch into any Spanish when the border guard ordered him out of the car. After my father respectfully obeyed the officer and got out of the car, so did I, loudly stating that he was my father, that he was born in Massachusetts, and that we lived in Los Angeles. The officer was calm and polite. He asked my father for a picture ID. My father said that he had forgotten to bring one. But my father spoke in unaccented English. The officer continued to talk to him, asking him why were in Mexico, how long we'd been there, things like that. Then my father said that he had been a Marine and had served in the Pacific in World War II. My father showed the officer the four Marine Corps tattoos that he had on his forearms and upper arms. One of them in particular, which was on his right forearm, was the Marine Corps symbol. You might remember that it's an eagle perched on top of the world, with an anchor at an angle behind the world. The border guard softened. He, too, had been a Marine, he said. He chatted with my father for a couple more minutes. Then the officer shook my father's hand and told us to have a safe drive home. My father went from suspect to brother.

Was it all based on superficial things that should not have been a factor in judging my father? Maybe it was. I did notice that it didn't bother my father any.

I spoke with my father as we drove back home. He had taken some beautiful pictures of the Mexican coast. The beach was narrow, with maybe fifteen feet of sand separating the bright blue-green water from thick, green vegetation. I told him that I had had a lot of fun and that I would like some of his prints, please. He offered me gas money, and since I was a student at the time, I took it. Then I joked with my father, telling him that I should have told the officer that he was a hitchhiker. He laughed, and then he said something very insightful. “I like being mistaken for a Mexican,” he said, “it keeps me closer to God.”

In conclusion, there are four points I’d like to make. First, we are a minority facing not violent persecution, but many people do treat us with deep and angry suspicion. Some hate us. Most people think we simply are not cool. Second, these people want us to believe that our church is in trouble, that it is dying. But third, they are judging us and our church superficially. They are looking only at now and they do not have the long view that God has. Here is my final point. My father taught me something huge, and that is to be thankful for being a believer – no matter what the world thinks of us. As we grow our church, we must portray to the world that our church is a place of joy and regeneration, a place that does not judge people by superficial characteristics. We must let them know what we know, and that is if we stay close to God, everything will be perfectly fine.