

# Hope in the Midst

a sermon based on

Romans 5:1-5

and delivered on

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Trinity Sunday (Year C)

at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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In the Gospel lesson that I just read, Jesus said “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” (Jn 16:12) What are these things that they cannot bear? These are the sort of things that I wonder when I read Scripture. I wonder, too, what it is that Paul means when he’s talking about grace but then goes on to talk about boasting in suffering.

At first blush, that doesn’t make sense. Who would boast about their suffering? But then I remember a conversation in seminary when some of us students were comparing how we suffered through the poverty of our college days. I bragged that, at one time in college, I would (and this is true) only eat once two or three days. I’d go to Paglais Pizza on Monday for all-you-can-eat pizza and bottomless Coke. I’d start with a large, then a medium, and finally a small pizza. A couple of days later, I’d go to Ponderosa Steak House for their buffet. You get the idea. I was going to win this thing. But then another student, Jim, told how he would go to a bar and order a beer just to nurse it for an hour or so, watching the tables. Then when he’d see some frat boy and his date get up to leave, he’d go over to eat the pizza that was left. He won.

You can probably think of some of your own examples, where you bragged about your suffering, maybe even with a little bit of competition. If not, I know that you’ve probably heard someone doing it. Christians are really good at it. It’s as if suffering magnifies the awesomeness of our faith.

But that is NOT what Paul is saying in that passage. This is the first thing that I want to make clear about this passage and our faith. There is NOTHING to celebrate in suffering. Job didn’t do it. He complained. Even Jesus, whom we are so often inclined to see as the suffering servant when we hear the prophet Isaiah say of him, “He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account,” (Is 53:3), didn’t like suffering. Think about it, what was his prayer in the garden the night he was arrested? His prayer after saying to the disciples, Peter, James, and John, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me?” What did he pray after he threw himself on the ground? “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.” (Mt 26:39b) And a second time, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” (Mt 26:42b) Why do we think that we should glorify our suffering, if Jesus himself would have avoided it if he could? Suffering is NOT good. It is bad. Period.

So, what are we to make out of Paul’s boast? Those first Christians had it rough. Especially Christians in Rome – the capitol of the empire. Following Jesus, wouldn’t just lead to ridicule or a bad reputation. It could cost you your livelihood, your life, or the lives of those dear to you. It still can. The men and women, boys and girls who were killed by that blast this past Easter in Sri Lanka died because they were Christians. The men and women gathered for Bible study at Mother Emmanuel AME church in South Carolina. Targeted for their race, yes; but as Christians, too. Not ten years ago, a church in southern Illinois was targeted. I’m not trying to scare anybody. We are relatively safe in our ability to practice our faith. But there’s always that risk isn’t there. The risk that if we admit to be Christians, we might be mocked as ignorant anti-intellectuals – even though the most prominent universities in our country were founded by churches. When we stand by Christian principles of righteousness and justice, we could lose our job. So we are face with a challenge – a choice of what to do. Do we risk it? Do we risk suffering for our faith?

This is where Paul takes us from suffering to hope, when he says that suffering builds endurance, endurance-character, and character-hope. (Ro. 5:3-6). But to make sense of that we have to go back to what he said right before, making that comment about boasting in suffering. He said, “Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace by; which we stand and in which we **boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.**” (Ro. 5:1-2).

This is where we so often get confused. Too often when we think of being justified by grace, of being righteous before the Lord, we think about it in terms of moral goodness. Too often, we

limit our understanding and the power of God's justifying grace to forgiveness for our transgressions. But as the great theologian, N.T. Wright, notes, that although Paul understood himself to be the apostle to the Gentiles, that he was very Jewish. And for a Jew and for a Pharisee, speaking about God's righteousness wasn't a discussion of God's moral character or even our own. No. The expression he uses the  $\theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon$   $\delta\iota\kappa\alpha\iota\omicron\upsilon\nu\eta$  or *diakaisōnē theo* – the righteousness of God or God's righteousness – is a legal term that might be better translated as the justice of God or God's justice. Justice not in the sense of punishment, justice not in the sense of making things right (although that comes indirectly) but he's talking about God's faithfulness to all of his promises.<sup>1</sup>

That's what Jeremiah looked to when Israel was led into Babylonian exile. That's what kept Job from cursing God – even as he complained. That sense that God was and is faithful to his promise – meant that suffering would not win. That's where the hope came in. Without hope, suffering is something to be avoided at all costs. But then what?

Got some pain? Take as many opioids – shoot up as much heroin as you like. Socially inept? Drink up as much liquid courage as it takes. Feeling unloved or lonely? Go ahead, get as much action as you can. That'll work. Right? Except we know that those things lead down a dark path. Don't they? A little pain relief is okay. There's no sin in a glass of wine or the desire for affection. But when our overwhelming goal is to avoid suffering nothing good comes out of it.

Instead, what Paul is boasting about is the ability to face suffering head on. The late night's studying for exams, we do them because there's a goal. The burning thighs during a workout, we push through because what used to hurt seems inconsequential now.

The Jewish psychiatrist, Victor Frankl discovered that when he was arrested by the Nazis during World War II. When he was taken to Auschwitz, everything he owned, everything he had was stripped away. When they stripped away his clothes, they stripped away his life's work. The manuscript he'd spent his years researching to write, was hidden away in the lining of his coat.

He wrote, "I had to undergo and overcome the loss of my spiritual child." And when it seemed that nothing of him would survive, neither he nor a physical or spiritual child of his own – when hope was fading and his clothes were stripped from him and he was handed the rags of some other poor soul whose lot ended in a gas chamber – he says, "Instead of the many pages of my manuscript, I found in the pocket of the newly acquired coat a single page torn out of a Hebrew prayer book, which contained the main Jewish prayer, Shema Yisrael (Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one God. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all of your might." Then he asks, "How shall I have interpreted such a 'coincidence' other than a challenge to live my thoughts instead of merely putting them on paper?"<sup>2</sup>

Our faith gives meaning to life. It tells us that God is so committed to you, that he was willing to suffer unimaginable torment for your sake. He tells us this not just for heaven to come, but so that when we face challenges and suffering in this life, we can endure knowing that we can hang on, pain ends. Have you ever heard that before? "Hang on – H O. Pain Ends – PE" When we do, it changes us. It strengthens us, and it blesses others until that hope is realized.

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<sup>1</sup> Leander E. Keck, ed., *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume IX: Acts, Introduction to Epistolary Literature, Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians* (Abingdon: Nashville, 2002) 403-405.

<sup>2</sup> Craig Brian Larson, *Illustrations for Preaching & Teaching from Leadership Journal* (Grand Rapids Mich.: Baker Books, 1993), 250–51.

Don't rejoice in suffering. But don't run from it either. God's righteousness means that you're better than that. God's promise is that your life has special meaning. You can have and be hope in the midst of whatever life throws your way. AMEN.