

Suffering→Endurance→Character→Hope

Romans 5:1-5
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Do you consider yourself to be a hopeful person? I'm not asking what you hope for, but rather are you generally hopeful? Admittedly, it's often hard to be hopeful these days for a lot of reasons, especially when looking at the news from a state and national level. So let's wonder together: **Where does hope come from? How can we obtain a hopeful attitude?**

Not surprisingly, the scriptures have a lot to say about hope, so let's look at one example, in particular. The apostle Paul, who knows a lot about suffering, tells us in his letter to the Romans that suffering leads to endurance, endurance develops character, and character results in hope. It's almost like a mathematical equation.

Suffering→endurance→character→hope.

This is the story line in countless movies and novels. It's a theme also found in many stories from the Hebrew scriptures, our Old Testament – some stories being over 3000 years old. The apostle Paul, like in the times of the ancient Hebrews, lived in a shame-based culture. Suffering and hardship were often considered shameful because many believed that it was somehow related to punishment by God. Some still believe that. Paul, however, asserts the opposite. In the first chapter of Romans he begins with such a claim, "I am not ashamed."

Not only is Paul not ashamed, **Paul also sees value in and through hardship.** The greatest benefit, which would not be immediately obvious to his readers, or to us, is that our suffering can indeed lead to our ability to persevere, which can lead to our growth in character and ultimately to hope. A positive attitude informs Paul's self-understanding. Whatever the circumstances, he looks to the future without despair – even in the worst crises, like when he himself is beaten and thrown into prison.

Where does that hope come from? Paul teaches, in part, it is found in our trust and confidence in God. In what progressives interpret as language of particularity, not language of exclusion, Paul reminds us that since we are made right with God by faith in and through Jesus Christ, we have obtained access to God's grace. He later tells us that **we have hope because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.**

I use the term, '**language of particularity**' because I am among those who believe **Paul is describing the experience of peace with God simply through the particular lens of Christianity.** An exclusionary approach, taken by traditional Christian orthodoxy, is that faith in Jesus is the *only* way to have access to God's redeeming grace. I don't believe that. And a growing number of Christians believe more in a radically inclusive God than a radically exclusive God.

Yet, **even peace with God does not exempt anyone from suffering in life.** And please, let's not get caught up in the game of ranking a hierarchy of suffering. For instance, have you ever been in a conversation when one person (perhaps yourself) is sharing the hardship they are going through just to be interrupted by someone else (perhaps yourself) saying, "Well, if you think that is bad, listen to what happened to me..." This, in effect, is the same as discounting the other person's experience of

suffering. Therefore, we must not deceive ourselves that our suffering is either better or worse than others; that physical suffering, for example, is worse than economic suffering, which is worse than emotional suffering, or visa versa. **The world is filled with suffering, that is just part of the human condition. It is how we respond to our suffering, and the suffering of others, that matters and makes all the difference.**

The last time I preached a sermon based on this passage from Romans 5 was way back in 2004. The first time was April 30, 1995, when I was an Associate Pastor at First Presbyterian Church of Fort Worth. Does April 19, 1995 ring any bells? That was the date of **the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City**. I had already been scheduled to preach, and knowing I had to address this horrendous act of terrorism and suffering, I took lots of notes from newspapers and TV newscasts in the aftermath of the bombing, especially concerning the memorial services that were being held. Needless to say, I was a bit leery in what some Oklahoma pastors might say.

In those memorial services, there was a mix, in my estimation, of both good and bad theology. The worst came when one preacher, in a eulogy at the funeral service of 2 young brothers, stated, and this is true, **"Look what God had to do to get our attention."** I mentioned in my sermon, as I did in the one I preached after 9-11, that **God is NOT a divine terrorist and does no such thing just to get our attention.** Afterwards, however, there was a spike in church attendance. Again, God is not the author of tragedy and suffering. I stated those exact words in the closing prayer I was asked to share last Monday at the Equality Center during a remembrance service for the 49 gunned down one year ago at the LGBTQ nightclub, named Pulse, in Orlando, Florida. God is not the author of evil. Who would be drawn to that kind of god?

The most level-headed and comforting words in Oklahoma City 22 years ago came, not too surprisingly, from the **Rev. Billy Graham**, whom I have great respect for and consider to be a pillar of integrity (unlike, I'm not afraid to share, his son, Franklin). Graham concluded a nationally televised memorial service, which included President Clinton and Governor Frank Keating, with this insightful observation. **"At times like this, we'll do one of two things: It will either make us hard and bitter and angry at God, or it will make us tender and open and help us reach out in trust and faith."** He added, "I pray that you will not let bitterness and poison creep into your souls, but you will turn in faith and trust to God even if we cannot understand. It is better to face something like this with God than without Him."

I couldn't agree more! It is truly better for you and me to face any suffering with God than without God! By the way, that means our awareness of God's Presence, because God is always with us.

Think for a moment of the times of greatest suffering and hardship in your life. There are indeed at least two different paths that can be taken: one leading to anger, bitterness and resentment, or the one that leads to a deeper trust and faith in God. The path of despair or the path of hope - which path do you tend to take most often?

Though we are not told the source of our suffering in this passage from Romans, we are taught that **God can turn our suffering into something good.** First, as already stated, it can lead to endurance and perseverance. For instance, any successful struggle for justice and human dignity necessitates the endurance which allows those involved to bear up under the weight of suffering and oppression. It is this endurance that allows us to bear up under the weight of our own suffering and hardships.

The value of endurance, in turn, is that it develops character. While this is certainly true, I caution you to use a bit of pastoral sensitivity when talking to a person

who is in the midst of suffering. **The last thing they need to hear is one more person telling them just how much character they are building.** Those of us who have been on the receiving end of such well-meaning comments know what I mean. I got a ton of those comments after losing my career as a petroleum geologist (along with my house and entire savings) in the mid-1980s during a crash in the oil industry. I would always think to myself, and sometimes speak aloud, "I have enough character, thank you very much."

We learn, however, that it is through the building of our character and moral strength that produces hope. **Hope, then, can be the endpoint of a series of events and attitudes that begins with our suffering.** But remember, hope is not just optimism for a better tomorrow. The optimist looks for circumstances to improve, and there's nothing wrong with that. Yet, we all know better than to think we can always control our circumstances. God never promises a life without suffering. Hope, on the other hand, is a bit different. **Hope does not depend on the ups and downs that cycle through our lives. Hope is a spiritual gift rooted in a relationship with the One who loves you and me with an everlasting love and who will always remain faithful.**

We can hope in God and rejoice in God's Sacred Presence even when our many wishes and dreams in life are not realized, and when we are not very happy with the current circumstances of our life. For remember, God suffers with us. Therefore, **we are called to be people of hope.** And as a community of faith, we can help and be present for each other, especially when we suffer.

Amen.