

SUFFERING

Romans 5:1-5

Therefore, 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 in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Matthew 26:69-75

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant-girl came to him and said, 'You also were with Jesus the Galilean.' But he denied it before all of them, saying, 'I do not know what you are talking about.' When he went out to the porch, another servant-girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, 'This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.' Again he denied it with an oath, 'I do not know the man.' After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, 'Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you.' Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath, 'I do not know the man!' At that moment the cock crowed. Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: 'Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly.

How Do We as Christians Approach Suffering?

This is week 2 of our Easter worship series called "Rise Up." Last week our theme was "salvation." This week: SUFFERING. It's appropriate to focus on suffering after focusing on salvation, because even when we understand that salvation is something that occurs in this life, those who are saved still experience suffering; salvation doesn't immunize you from suffering in this life. Suffering is so prevalent that it forces us to ask if it is indeed part of God's plan, or to put in popular vernacular, *does it happen for a reason?*

And we as Christians need to be careful and humble in our response to that question; careful in the sense that we don't just try to offer up some answer, and humble in acknowledging that we may never really have a good answer. I'm reminded of a woman who started a company that produces *empathy* cards, which are like sympathy cards but are perhaps more honest and even more humorous than sympathy cards; one card says something like, "Let me be the first person to hit the next person who tells you that everything happens for a reason." When someone loses a loved one or when someone has a debilitating disease, the last thing that person needs to hear is that "everything happens for a reason." In a sense this is the *least* comforting thing you can say to a person, because if things that are beyond our control, it means they must be under God's control, and if you are implying that God is causing or such things to happen, I can think of no better reason for a person to turn away from God, or to reject the notion that God even exists. Why would God want us to suffer? Is God just cruel? And if so, why would I relish the idea of spending an eternity with such a God?

I believe that it's best to allow such questions as "Why does God allow suffering" to remain unanswered and not to assign God responsibility for human suffering. The fact is that suffering exists, and though we can certainly see ways that science and public policy have alleviated a lot of suffering over the centuries, suffering will always occur.

But here I'd like to explore our Epistle lesson for a moment, because Paul is saying something quite profound about suffering, and how faith and suffering interact. Paul begins by saying "...since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God." Our faith is in God's amazing grace, which we come to know through Jesus Christ, and faith is the lens through which we look at suffering. Notice the way Paul looks at suffering; he says we rejoice in it – I know the NRSV translates it that we *boast* in suffering, but Paul uses the same Greek word that

in the previous verse is translated “rejoice,” so why not retain that translation in verse 3? We rejoice in our suffering. Is Paul completely nuts? As I’ve already noted, suffering can lead a person to reject God or to get angry with God. I have heard people tell me in all honesty that they are upset with God for allowing someone they know to suffer. Paul isn’t saying that suffering is good, but Paul sees suffering in the context of God’s love. He is able to look down the road a ways and see eternity. When you walk with Jesus in faith, as Paul did, you can look down the road and see that it is eternal and that this life is but a blip on the radar, that our life in Christ knows no end, and Jesus promises that the suffering ends. So suffering can strengthen you, build your endurance – we know the adage “no pain, no gain” – and endurance produces character – someone who has persevered through suffering is better able to empathize with someone else who is suffering, better able to comfort and counsel, and console. Suffering makes us better.

Then Paul makes an interesting leap; he says that character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us. Well, by definition hope cannot disappoint us because it’s hope; hope is belief that things will get better and end well. So Paul concludes this passage by explaining where this hope really comes from. Hope doesn’t come through suffering; hope is what brings us through suffering. Hope itself, Paul says, comes from God, from the Holy Spirit that is poured into our hearts. It comes from God’s love – I heard the Pope say that God is in essence love. And that love comes to us is through Jesus Christ, God’s gift to us, love given to us out of love. Remember we’re in the Easter season; we’re talking about Resurrection, which is about Jesus, which is about God’s love conquering death itself, and living eternally and promising us that we too live eternally in Christ, in God’s love, and that is the source of our hope, a hope that cannot be destroyed because we know the Risen Lord, the One who not only conquers death but sin as well, so that the future we look forward to is not the same as the present but is a perfected future, where peace and justice and above all *love* rule the day! Does suffering cease because we know Jesus Christ? Of course not. But our faith assures us that we eternally dwell with the One whose love overcomes all else, and so we can endure suffering and grow stronger though it, and it builds our character – oh how I admire those among us who I know have suffered horribly this past year and yet exhibit such faith and love for God and for others. You are a testimony to what Paul is describing here in his letter to the Romans. You are a testimony to that hope that carries you through all that pain.

And this brings me to a distinction between two different types of suffering; physical and spiritual. When our bodies are broken or worn away by a disease or as the result of some horrible injury, we suffer physically while those who love us suffer emotionally. And that is why I say that suffering will always exist in this world; because we love one another and therefore we suffer when we witness suffering. It’s like that old saying, “This is going to hurt me more than it hurts you.” It’s true; when we physically punish a child for misbehavior, we feel a worse sort of pain, an emotional pain from watching someone we love suffer. It’s worse to watch someone we love being physically hurt than it is for us to endure that same physical hurt. If we are truly loving human beings, and I believe we are, we’re created in God’s image after all, our love can bring about suffering, more suffering in fact than any injury or disease or physical pain can bring about.

And that’s what our Gospel lesson is meant to illustrate. It’s about Peter’s denial of Jesus as he was about to be condemned to death, slow painful, suffering death. We can say with some degree of certainty that Peter’s denial of Jesus was caused by his own aversion to suffering; if he had admitted knowing Jesus, if he had been identified as one of Jesus’ disciples, he too might have been flogged and humiliated and crucified. He didn’t want to face any of that any more than you or I would; we get it. The funny thing is that in avoiding one kind of suffering, Peter subjects himself to a far worse kind of suffering, a spiritual suffering caused by denying Jesus. It’s a suffering caused by love, in this case a suffering caused not only by our witnessing one who we love being abused and hurt, but it’s a suffering caused by our own failure to be more loving, to save our own skin rather than risk sharing in the suffering of others. Peter went out and wept bitterly. We should weep bitterly if we ever abandon a friend in need, but Jesus was not just any friend; he is our best friend, the best friend we could ever have, one who loves us completely, one who lays down his life for us. To deny Jesus out

of fear of suffering will only lead us to a worse kind of suffering, a suffering of the soul as we turn our backs on God himself.

The good news is that Peter's story doesn't end there; according to Mark's gospel the angels tell the women to tell the disciples, and specifically Peter, that Jesus has risen. And in John's Gospel we know that Jesus commissions Peter in particular to feed his sheep. Jesus doesn't hold Peter's sin over him; he doesn't even mention it but instead has breakfast with him on the beach and commissions him to lead the church. And Peter goes on to suffer a great deal on account of his faith in Jesus. But like Paul, Peter can contrast the suffering he currently endures with the future glory that he shares with Jesus; the suffering only makes the end look more glorious, more wonderful, because it's an end where we are completely enveloped in God's love, where there is no suffering – only bliss.

So hope is what helps us endure all suffering, physical and spiritual. We are Christians; we are Easter people. We live with the confidence that God eventually eradicates all suffering as he establishes his Kingdom of peace and justice and love. The love of God that can cause us to suffer as we participate in the suffering of others also prompts us to alleviate suffering to the best of our abilities, and failure to address the suffering of others when we have the means to do so leads us to greater suffering as we come to regret our own failure to love. The take home should be clear. God calls us to address human suffering of all kinds, and as Christians we are blessed with the Holy Spirit that will not allow us to ignore suffering lest we suffer in our own spirit. May the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead to give us hope also motivate us to share that hope with others.