



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
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A Stephen Ministry Congregation
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2nd Sunday in Lent

February 25, 2018

“Can We Really Rejoice in Our Sufferings?”

(Romans 5:3-5)

Rev. David K. Groth

“More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (Rom 5:3-5).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: O God, You see that of ourselves we have no strength. By Your mighty power defend us from all adversities that may happen to the body and from all evil thoughts that may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Did you happen to read the commencement address last year by John Roberts, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court? He spoke at his son's middle school graduation, and his speech went viral. Among other things, he said this: "From time to time in the years to come, I hope you will be treated unfairly, so that you will come to know the value of justice. I hope that you will suffer betrayal because that will teach you the importance of loyalty. Sorry to say, but I hope you will be lonely from time to time so that you don't take friends for granted. I wish you bad luck, again, from time to time so that you will be conscious of the role of chance in life and understand that your success is not completely deserved and that the failure of others is not completely deserved either. And when you lose, as you will from time to time, I hope every now and then, your opponent will gloat over your failure. It is a way for you to understand the importance of sportsmanship. I hope you'll be ignored so you know the importance of listening to others, and I hope you will have just enough pain to learn compassion. Whether I wish these things or not, they're going to happen. And whether you benefit from them or not will depend upon your ability to see the message in your misfortunes." (Quoted from the WSJ, July 8, 2017)

Chief Justice Roberts was speaking, of course, about the value of hard teachers, those negative experiences in life that instill grit and perseverance into our character. Those negative experiences happen to us all, and the good news that he expressed so well is the same good news taught in the Scriptures long ago – that suffering is not meaningless. Suffering is not worthless or pointless or unimportant. We don't have to avoid suffering at all costs. The Bible says:

“All things work together for the good of those who love him, who are called according to his purposes” (Rom. 8:28). By the way, that’s not a verse that I use in the hospital or funeral home, because I don’t want to risk sounding like I’m denying the pain of others or somehow minimalizing it or dismissing it. But it is a verse and a promise worth keeping in mind at least in the midst of our own suffering.

Some of this is just intuitive; we know it instinctively. For example, shortly after he got his driver’s license, I was so glad when my son got pulled over by the police. He was driving too fast, and there’s nothing quite like the bright flashing lights in the rear view mirror to make us better and safer drivers. A little pain and shame and stress is ok for our children. We should not try to protect them from all negative experiences or blame those experiences on others: the cop, the teacher, the referee. Negative experiences are hard teachers, for sure, but effective.

That’s the point of our text. Paul even goes so far as to say that as Christians, we can “rejoice in our sufferings.” Sounds ridiculous, right? No one rejoices in suffering per se, but again, as Christians we know God produces good things through suffering.

Paul goes on to list some of those good things. First, suffering produces endurance. Have you been watching the Winter Olympics? What those athletes can do is amazing, but they didn’t get there magically. Their athleticism wasn’t just gifted to them. How many times did the snowboarders get up off the snow after having fallen? How many hours did the cross country skiers train to extend their endurance? Every one of those athletes suffered. Every one of them pushed themselves beyond the edges of their capabilities to grow their endurance.

Paul says, “Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character.” That too is intuitive, isn’t it? When you’ve endured through difficulties in the past, you’re better prepared to address challenges in the future.

A 2011 study found that a moderate amount of stress in childhood promotes resilience. Psychology professor

Mark Seery gave healthy undergraduates a stress test. That is, he measured how much stress they had experienced earlier in life based on 37 different kinds of significant negative events, such as the illness or death of a family member. Then he plunged their hands into ice water and measured their pain. (Nice guy, right?) What he discovered is those students who had experienced a moderate number of stressful events actually felt significantly less pain than those who had experienced little stress. That is, having a history of dealing with negative events leads people to be more resilient. It gives them character and grit. They are better equipped to deal with the everyday stressors (WSJ, 9/28/13).

“Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.” It’s true, even on a very practical level.

A couple of weeks ago, I replaced two toilettes in our home. For some of you, this is really easy stuff; but nothing in the world of home repairs comes easy for me! In my mind there’s something inherently dark and mysterious about plumbing . . . and electricity, and dry walling, mechanical repairs . . . So I wasn’t looking forward to replacing those two toilettes, in part because you cannot fix those things without hugging them! But I resolved that, by gum, I’m going to do this project all by myself . . . and, I did. It wasn’t pretty. It wasn’t quick. It required a number of trips to the hardware store, and a little advice from a friend, and a couple of bandages, but I got it done, and now I’m a little more *hopeful* about the next time I have to repair or replace a toilette. Even in practical ways, “Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.”

Finally, Paul adds, “And hope does not disappoint us.” It’s true on a practical level, but Paul is talking in spiritual terms now. After all, we can suffer on a spiritual level too, right? I’m thinking about persecution, or deep disappointment in a church or a pastor. We can suffer from having doubts in our faith. In all these things, suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and

character produces hope. For example with doubt, you learn over time that doubt is not the opposite of faith, but, in fact, an inherent part of faith. Sooner or later you learn to live with your doubts and manage them and not let them rule the roost.

Paul concludes this string with the words, “and hope does not disappoint us.” Of course, he’s speaking specifically, and exclusively of the hope we have in Christ. I say exclusively because if we put our ultimate hope for life and salvation anyplace else, we will be deeply disappointed. If we think we can save ourselves by being good or doing good, that is misplaced hope. If we think another person will save us from suffering, or that wealth can do it, again, that is misplaced hope. But the hope we have in Christ will not disappoint us.

In this text Paul points us to a few things we can be sure of as we suffer. First this from verse one: “We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” That is, in the midst of our suffering, we don’t have to wonder or worry about whether God is angry at us and we’re simply feeling his wrath. No, through Christ we have peace with God. 2 Corinthians 5, “God has reconciled us to himself through Christ” (v. 18). That means he’s not counting our sin against us. He’s not keeping track of them so he can one day fully vent his anger on us. No, we have peace with God on account of Christ. What a tremendous gift it is in the midst of suffering! We need to remind ourselves of it and be reminded of it all the time. At Lutheran Hospital in St. Louis, they had a cross in front of every hospital bed, and the message of that cross is the one who created you is not out to get you for what you’ve done. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, he is at peace with you, and, in fact, loves you.

In verse two of our text Paul writes by faith we now *stand* in this grace. Grace is not a one-time gift. No, we stand in it. It doesn’t always feel like it, but we live in the state of grace because we are his baptized children. Because of this grace, Paul writes, “we rejoice in the hope of the

glory of God.” That is, despite the suffering we’re going through now, we can look forward to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ.

It’s a consistent message. 2 Corinthians 4: “For our light and momentary troubles are preparing for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” And from Romans 8: “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth even comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (v. 18).

How can we be sure of this eternal life? Paul tells us in verse six: “For while we were still weak, Christ died for the ungodly.” That word weak is a Greek term describing someone who is seriously ill and powerless, unable to help himself. That’s each of us in the spiritual realm. Sin’s grip on us is so strong that we cannot break free of it ourselves. But Jesus became weak for us with our sin gripping him on the cross, even to the point of death, to free us from sin.

Paul is very frank about how unusual this is. “Very rarely” he writes, “will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” That is, Christ died not for righteous people, but for sinners, for those who didn’t even know him. He died for his enemies, for those who are opposed to him. That’s grace. That’s God’s generous mercy toward undeserving people.

Paul ends the passage with the word “rejoice.” Earlier he said we can rejoice in our sufferings, because they bring about good things. Here he invites us to rejoice specifically in our Savior Jesus because he brings about salvation.

Can we really rejoice in our sufferings? I’ve not learned how to do that yet, but I do rejoice in Christ my Savior. I trust, (sometimes blindly, willfully), that God will keep his promises and use our suffering somehow for his purposes in ways we might not ever understand. You and I are not sinners in the hands of an angry God. We are the redeemed people of God in the hands of a good and gentle and gracious God. Amen.

