

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word

May 29, 2016

Rev. John F. Koerner

First Presbyterian Church

Clarksburg, WV

Romans 5:1-5

...we 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. (Romans 5:3-5 N.R.S.V.)

Let the Bad Times Roll

Did you ever have one of those days where everything went wrong? I remember one day while I was in the Air Force, my crew was called out to change the Gatling gun on a plane. We got the old one out just fine, but had great trouble getting the replacement back in. Then the external hydraulic pump wouldn't work so we had to sit around and wait until a new one could be brought out. Then when we plugged the new one into hanger wall socket, the wiring started smoking. Procedure dictated that we had to call the fire department.

The fire department came rushing up sirens screaming and made us leave the scene. Then some of them grumbled because there was no fire. The socket had stopped smoking as soon as we unplugged from it.

When we were finally allowed back on the scene, we discovered that someone had stolen half the tools out of our toolbox. We had to go get new tools. Finally we finished the job and went back to the shop where upon the Sargent yelled at us for leaving our tools unsecured and said that if it happened again we would have to pay for them.

Finally it was quitting time and I got in my car to drive home. On the way back to the barracks, the fan belt broke on my car and I had to install a new one. It was an awful, horrible, very bad day, one that I would not have wanted to repeat.

Still it was only one day and not all that bad when you compare it with the very real and agonizing struggles that many people go through. Some people go through not just bad days, or bad weeks, but bad years and years and years.

The Apostle Paul knew about suffering. He was stoned and left for dead. He was beaten with rods more than once. He was shipwrecked. He was imprisoned. He suffered from some kind of "thorn in the flesh" which God refused to heal.

It is therefore somewhat of a surprise when we hear Paul say in our lesson for today that he boasts in suffering. That is quite a shock to our Western sensibilities. In our society pain and suffering are seen simply as bad things and we work very hard to avoid them. Yet, Paul can say with confidence that suffering can be redemptive.

Paul is not suggesting that we deliberately seek out suffering. Rather he says that God can use our suffering to shape, strengthen, and transform us. Our suffering can be a good thing if we allow God to lead us through it.

Paul says that suffering produces endurance. In other words, suffering is not meant to destroy us, but rather to make us stronger. Weight lifters have a saying, "No pain, no gain." What they mean by that, is that unless you push your limits, you will not get stronger.

Our spiritual muscles are built stronger the same way that our physical muscles are strengthened. When we trust God to strengthen us and we keep going, no matter what, we get spiritually stronger. We learn to trust God more. We learn that we are far stronger than what we first thought.

Once you have been through the deep, dark valleys of suffering, you recognize the little pains of life for the mere pot holes in the road that they are.

Paul goes on to say that endurance produces character. Suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character. Character in this case means integrity, determination, and empathy.

It has been pointed out that we do our children no good, if we over protect them. Children need to be able to fail, to fall, to get back up and try again. Otherwise we will be raising a generation of spiritual pygmies.

One of the things that all successful baseball players have to overcome is fear of the ball. Many young players will duck and turn away rather than catch the ball. Some will quit the first time they get hit by the ball. Successful players learn how to stand firm and catch the ball right. But even professional ball players get hit by the ball sometimes. By that time, they have been hit by the ball so many times they have learned to ignore the pain and keep going for the love of the game.

Becoming a mature Christian means understanding that sometimes we have to take an unpopular stand and our friends may not understand. Sometimes we get hurt and we suffer for our faith in Christ, Paul certainly did. Growing in faith means that we become people of character who will stand firm when needed and help others in spite of the pain.

Suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. Some people use the word hope in the same way that they would use wishful thinking. Hope in the biblical sense, is much more robust. Hope is based on experience.

During World War One the US Navy discovered that when their ships were sunk by the enemy, the sailors were often left in lifeboats for several days before they could be rescued. The Navy noticed that many sailors died in those cold and exhausting conditions. They also noticed that the survivors tended to be the older sailors. One would think that the younger sailors would be in better physical shape and health and that they would therefore survive longer in those punishing conditions.

The Navy realized that the difference was that many of the older sailors had been in the lifeboats before and had been rescued. Based on their experience, the older sailors had hope that they would likely be rescued. That hope helped them hang on far longer than those who had no hope.

The Navy begin to brief their crews that if their ship sank, they might be in the lifeboats for several days, they could expect that. But then they would likely be rescued. After that, the survival rate soared. (Dynamic Preaching, May 2016, pg 43)

Hope is such an important thing, particularly when that hope is based on our experience of how much God loves us. Some people of course, are just more hopeful than others. Mostly though, hope is something gained by experience.

I have read before that one of the causes of teenage suicide is that teenagers don't have enough life experience to know that things will get better again. They often think that the problem they are facing is the end of the world and that there is no escape.

As Christians, we grow stronger in our faith, in our courage, in our endurance, in our character, and in our hope. We grow stronger as God brings us through the difficult struggles in life.

Dynamic Preaching has a great story about a Sunday School Class that was asked to share their favorite verse for times of discouragement.

A young man said, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. Psalm 23:1"

A middle age woman said, "God is my refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Psalm 46:1"

Another woman said, "In this world you shall have tribulations, but be of good cheer, I have overcome this world. John 16:33."

Then Mr. John, who was 80 years old said, "And it came to pass. . . . That is found 85 times in the Bible." The class started to laugh because they thought many the old gentleman had lost his memory.

But then he continued:

"At 30 I lost my job and didn't know how I was going to feed my children"

"At 40 my eldest son was killed overseas in the war. It knocked me down."

"At 50 my house burned to the ground. Nothing was saved out of the house."

“At 60 my wife got cancer and it slowly ate away at her. We cried together many a night on our knees in prayer.”

“At 65 she died. I still miss her today.”

“The pain I went through in each of these situations was unbelievable. I wondered where God was. But each time I looked in the Bible I saw one of those 85 verses that said, ‘and it came to pass.’ I felt that God was telling me, my pain and my circumstances were also going to pass and that God would get me through it. And indeed God did just that.” (Dynamic Preaching, May 2016, pg. 44)

In spite of all of our modern medicine and wonderful technology, there is still a tremendous amount of suffering and pain in the world. I don’t know why God allows this to go on. I do know that he promises to help us through those times, and more than that, God promises to strengthen us and mature us through those times.

The modern world says “all suffering and pain is bad.” God’s word says, that suffering and pain can be, with God’s help, redemptive “*. . . we 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.*”

As the music begins to play softly, let us think and pray on these things.

Amen