

## **“SUFFERING”**

### **Romans 5:1-11**

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.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person —though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.

But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God.

For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.

But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

## **Psalm 88**

O LORD, my God, I call for help by day;

I cry out in the night before you.

Let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry.

For my soul is full of troubles,

and my life draws near to Sheol.

I am reckoned among those who go down to the Pit;

I am a person who has no strength,

like those forsaken among the dead,

like the slain that lie in the grave,

like those whom you remember no more,

for they are cut off from your hand.

You have put me in the depths of the Pit,

in the regions dark and deep.

Your wrath lies heavy upon me,

and you do overwhelm me with all your waves.

You have caused my companions to shun me;

you have made me a thing of horror to them.

I am shut in so that I cannot escape;

my eye grows dim through sorrow.

Every day I call on you, O LORD;

I spread out my hands to you.

Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise up to praise you?

Is your steadfast love declared in the grave,

or your faithfulness in Abaddon?

Are your wonders known in the darkness,

or your saving help in the land of forgetfulness?

But I, O LORD, cry out to you;  
    in the morning my prayer comes before you.  
O LORD, why do you cast me off?  
Why do you hide your face from me?  
Wretched and close to death from my youth up,  
    I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.  
Your wrath has swept over me;  
    your dread assaults destroy me.  
They surround me like a flood all day long;  
    from all sides they close in on me.  
You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me;  
    my companions are in darkness.

# **SUFFERING**

Romans 5:1-11 (Psalm 88)

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## **Children's Sermon:**

Give candy bar to each kid. They can all keep them, if any one of them can hold their breath longer than Rev. Mike. Hold contest, time kids, longest time goes up against Rev. Mike. My turn, take breath, then just be I have to exhale pull out a plastic bag and blow breath into bag and hold it. Kids lose (suffer) have to give candy back, teach them that no matter what they do, or how hard they try they still may still have to suffer. And no, they are correct. It isn't fair.

### **I.**

Given that we are in the very midst of the Lenten season, this morning I would like to speak to you about SUFFERING. In order to do so, however, we first need to talk a little bit about sin and temptation. While sin and temptation are certainly interesting in their own right, they are critical to the proper understanding of SUFFERING. We begin by doing some heavy lifting with regard to our theological understanding of sin and temptation by giving answer to some sinful questions. We will get to temptation in a minute, but first let's begin with sin. Is sin really what we think it is?

### **II.**

Is sin a new thing or an old thing? Is it individual or corporate? Is it one more than the other? Has anyone here, not yet sinned? Is it possible to not sin? Do you have to be aware you are sinning to sin? Can you sin by merely thinking of something sinful? Or, do you need to do something sinful to sin? How often do you think you sin? Daily? Weekly? Monthly? Every few years? Do you sin more during certain times of your life than others? Can/do babies sin? toddlers? children? teens? Is the onset of adulthood signaled by an increase in sinning? Do people, on the whole, sin less in retirement than any other time?

### **III.**

Do men sin more than woman? In theory, or in actuality? Are babies sinful, or sin filled? Are we born knowing right from wrong? Are we born with the ability to do right rather than wrong? Is the definition of sin constant over time, or culturally conditioned? (Slavery, polygamy). Does sin have a consequence? Is the consequence of sin its own, or is it something larger?

Are we responsible for the sins of those who have gone before us? In Christian orthodoxy, are our sins erased? Or, are our sins paid for? Did God create sin? Is it sinful to ask if God makes us sin? Does God make us sin? Does God create situations which tempt us to sin? Does God create temptation?

#### IV.

As the kids discovered so vividly this morning, suffering is very real indeed, and not just as an expression of one pastor's sneakiness, or any number of individual bad actors. No, the entire world exists in a state of sinfulness, of brokenness of *dis-ease*. And we along with it. Take heart, though, my sisters and brothers because in accepting the reality of sin we gain clarity and insight on our suffering. Think of it as a bad news/bad news kind of thing.

Simply put, if there was no sin, there would be no suffering. Yet there *is* sin so, therefore, there *is* suffering. While it is true *individual* sin can certainly lead to suffering as a consequence for stealing cookies from the cookie jar, the *real* reason for SUFFERING has to do with the sinful state of the world. That the cookie jar, itself, is broken.

#### V.

In today's first scripture reading from Romans, the Apostle Paul tip-toes through the pottery shards and cookie crumbs scattered all over the floor to arrive at a remarkably creative understanding of how God has intervened in our world through the cross of Christ to clean up the tossing of our cookies. Before we get into all of that, however, let's take a hard look at suffering by looking at the world, and ourselves, through the eyes of the Psalmist.

#### VI.

Here in Psalm 88 the pollyanna person of faith, like Elvis, has left the building and we get down to the nitty-gritty of suffering. We learn, first and foremost, that suffering is brutally real. Though suffering is sometimes *avoidable*, at a certain point it is always *inevitable*. Second, although the circumstances and source of the suffering may be the same, suffering is always different as it is a function of the *specific* individual who is *experiencing* the suffering. Because of this, no one ever truly knows what others are going through. Third, the Psalmist helps us recognize, there really is no way to prepare ourselves for suffering. Even past experiences of suffering will not necessarily prepare us for that we are to suffer next. Fourth, and finally,

suffering is not relative. Our suffering is not made better because of the suffering of another, or somehow become more manageable because others may be suffering more.

## VII.

All of that said, do not for even one moment think that the Apostle Paul did not share the Psalmist grim understanding of sin, and the suffering which is its consequence, when he wrote the words of today's text to the church at Rome. Essentially, Romans 5:1-11 is an articulation of cause, effect, and response. Having examined sin as the cause and suffering its effect, we turn our attention to the response. Both God's response and our human response.

For Paul, God's response to sin and suffering is Christ's dying on the cross for the ungodly, and doing so at the *right* time. Though this may *sound* individualistic, we recognize that Paul's notion of sin, taken from the the entire body of his work, is of a *cosmic* nature. The whole ball of wax is broken. The needs of the individual cannot be addressed by anything less than meeting the needs of the whole. In trying to save the individual sheep, God must not only save the entire flock that is humanity but, also, the cosmic pasture in which we graze.

## VIII.

Now, just so we are checking all of our orthodoxy boxes, let us also be sure we have an accurate understanding of salvation which is referred to as justification and reconciliation in today's text. At the start of the sermon we asked ourselves a good number of head-scratching questions. I have to tell you, I was *tremendously* impressed that some of you immediately and emphatically correctly answered the question, "*Are our sins erased, or are our sins paid for?*" The answer is, they are *paid for*, and the price was the cross, borne by Christ, on behalf of the whole ball of wax. As such, salvation is a gift to us that we receive by grace through faith. In today's text, Pauls says it this way: *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...*

## **IX.**

This, then, is *God's* response to the sin and suffering of a broken world: the gift of salvation, reconciliation, and justification. *Our* response is to either accept this gift, variously expressed, by means of our faith...or not. In the abstract, such a choice is easy to make, isn't it? In practice, however, it proves much more difficult. For the Apostle Paul, a tepid response is no response at all. In essence, Paul says to us today that the time for half-measures is *over*. We are no longer just *abiding* our sufferings, we are *boasting* in them and, by so doing, boasting in the hope of sharing God's glory. It is no longer about simply hoping for the best with our heads in the sand. Instead, God calls us to act.

## **X.**

Whereas we can do nothing to atone for our sin, and little to avoid our own suffering or that of our world, it turns out we have a *stunning* amount of power in how we choose to *respond* to our suffering. Yet, we are waiting for Godot if we seek a response that comes from the top down. We must respond from the ground up, beginning with each of you here today sitting in these pews and joining in at home.

Paul recognizes that because of God's salvific response to sin and suffering, a new path has been made for how we, ourselves, are able to respond. The cross creates a cosmic paradigm shift. We do not need to suffer now in the same way we have suffered in the past. If we truly have the faith that we can boast in our hope won on the cross, then, says Paul, we can 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.

## **XI.**

The Apostle Paul reminds us that although there is no intrinsic value to suffering, such suffering now brings with it certain *opportunities*. Chief among these are endurance, character, and hope. For Paul, every instance of suffering is an occasion for us to strengthen our endurance, deepen our character, and make manifest our hope.

When we first encounter our next instance of suffering there is no value to denying that the tribulation is indeed upon us. The only way we will get *past* the suffering is to move *through* the suffering. Like sin as the cause, and suffering its effect, there is no avoiding it. The only power we have in such a situation, is how we will move through our suffering. How we will respond as a congregation, as a community, and as a nation? What will be our response to suffering? Why will we respond to suffering in this way? When is the right time to do so?

## **XII.**

Our two scripture readings for today highlight a stark contrast between the Psalmist who suffers *alone* and the Apostle Paul who calls us to suffer *together*. We have been brought together in this church, and into each other's lives, by God's love which has been poured into our hearts and through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us. Regardless of what the future brings we will suffer it together, and share our sufferings with each other. It is simply the nature of we are, as a church, and nothing will change this.

Will we ignore or hide from our sufferings, or will we have the courage to acknowledge, share and, yes, even boast in them? Will we hold the line together and stand firm in the grounding of our faith for however long, and in whatever way, is required of us? Will we make real in our lives the moral and ethical imperatives received in our youth and honed in adulthood to muster a character of fidelity and compassion?

## **XIII.**

And, finally, will we have the patience to confirm in ourselves the hope we carry even now? A hope which will not disappoint us. A hope which was placed within our hearts when God formed our inward parts, knitting us together in our mother's womb with awe and wonder. In no way should we see God's hand in any instance of sin or suffering. Instead, we should feel God's shared presence and wisdom beckoning to us in the opportunity sin and suffering ever affords. The season of Lent challenges us to consider that our past filled with half-measures is *over*. The time is *right*, and the time is *now* to learn the lesson that we belong to *each other*, and we will stand together in grace or fall together in sin and suffering. As a church, as a nation and as a world.

#### **XIV.**

Just as God fixes the cookie jar in order to save all the cookies, we must suffer *all* of God's children to come into our hearts, for to such as these belong the Kingdom of God. In suffering others, by welcoming them into our lives, showing them compassion, and by simply being a good neighbor we, ourselves, arrive at last to that distant shore which is always the very same shore upon which we already stand. Amen.