

May 26, 2019 – (Easter 6, Romans 5)

Sermon Text – Romans 3:28-30; 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. -

Paul knew about suffering. First, he had inflicted it on others. As a persecutor of the church, he had arrested followers of Jesus, had them thrown in prison and participated in their punishment. Second, after his conversion, he had been persecuted as a follower of Christ. In writing to the church at Corinth, he had introduced himself with a list of his credentials as a Christian: "Whatever anyone dares to boast of...I also dare to boast of that...Are they ministers of Christ? ...I am a better one: with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches." So, when he writes to the church at Rome, he is speaking from his own personal experience. "We also boast in our sufferings," he tells them, "knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us." Paul has lived it. He has learned it. He has come to know that the experience of suffering in his ministry has not diminished his enthusiasm for his calling but has strengthened him. He has grown through his suffering. He has learned to cope with harsh conditions and false accusations. And he has developed a faith that is rock solid and that provides him with hope in the promises of the Lord.

Of course, this is not to say that all suffering is good. It is not. And we need to be very careful about how we interpret other peoples' suffering. Sometimes, suffering is simply the result of evil. Sometimes, it comes as the result of sin. Sometimes, it is simply accidental. We live in a broken world. Not everything that happens is good. Bad things happen too. Sometimes they can be avoided. Sometimes they can't. Suffering happens. But there is no reason that people should be expected to suffer

needlessly. The Romans to whom Paul was writing would have been well aware of this. Ancient philosophy had much to say about suffering. The Hedonists did everything they could to avoid it. The Stoics endured it without complaint, but certainly did nothing to seek it out. And the Jews acknowledged its presence but saw the world as God's fundamentally good creation. Paul is in this last group. But, now that suffering has come upon him, he has been unable to avoid it. He has learned to endure it. It has served to develop his character. And it has given him hope. He is now willing to state his interpretation of it for his readers. The problem for us is with the language of production. "Suffering produces endurance..." That makes it sound like a good thing, a desirable thing, a thing we would want for ourselves or for others. We want to have endurance. We want to have character. We want to be hopeful. But that doesn't mean that we should all seek out suffering in order to build our character. Some will do that, disciplining themselves to run marathons, for instance, but that isn't necessarily for everyone. Paul is simply describing what has happened to him. He is not prescribing suffering as a healthy or helpful way of life for others.

On the other hand, Paul's understanding of suffering gives it a new dignity as well. As a follower of Christ, who had come to see Jesus' suffering as a means to humanity's reconciliation with God, he saw his purpose being to preach Christ, and him crucified. "As the sign of the new [Christian] religion," says Martin Marty, Lutheran pastor and theologian, "the cross signified much more than Christ's victory over death. It also symbolized an inversion of accepted norms. Suffering was noble rather than merely pathetic when accepted in imitation of the crucified Christ. Forgiveness -- even of one's enemies -- became the sign of the true Christian. More radically, Jesus taught that in the kingdom of God the last would be first, the first last. In the New Testament, you find Jesus more among the beggars than the rulers, the sick than the healthy, the women and children than the conquerors, the prostitutes and lepers than the holy people." And, says Kenneth L. Woodward "Christianity also challenged prevailing notions of the virtuous life. Where Aristotle had touted prudence, justice, courage and temperance as the virtues proper to the good life, Jesus emphasized the blessedness of humility, patience and peacemaking in his crowning Sermon on the Mount." To live as Christ to our neighbors in this world is to realize that suffering may be a part of our callings as Jesus' followers.

On this weekend, when we remember those who have given their lives in the service of our country, it is easy to think about their suffering and sacrifice. One soldier, whom I have long admired and about whom much has been written, was Senator John McCain. His well-documented experience of being captured and tortured during the war in Viet Nam is told in a book called "Faith of My Fathers." In it, author Peter Kann observes: "It is faith in himself...that prisoner McCain discovers to be the 'least formidable strength' in withstanding these trials. Faith in self alone, absent larger and higher allegiances, is no match for systematic inhumanity. What sustains

him and others through all this is 'faith in God, faith in country, faith in your fellow prisoners ...without faith we would lose our dignity and live among our enemies as animals live among their human masters,'" he quotes McCain as saying, as he interprets his own experience. Like the suffering of so many who choose a life of service, McCain's suffering was neither sought, nor can we call it good; but, in the midst of it, there was learning and growth, the development of new insight and the expansion of faith. Survival depended upon it, as it did for Paul, as it may for us. Paul concludes his sentence by saying, "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." That's our hope too, so that, knowing the love of God through Jesus Christ, we may have peace with God, even in the midst of our suffering.

Amen.