

How do we get from suffering to hope?

Romans 5: 1-15

Trinity Sunday, Year C

June 16, 2019

Ah, Trinity Sunday. I am thinking that Roy must not like to preach on this Sunday, because going back through my old sermons, this is my fourth time preaching on Trinity Sunday! So I've been struggling with what to say that feels new. Earlier this week I was enjoying the gorgeous weather and walking Roscoe while listening to my favorite lectionary podcast. The hosts, all three professors at Luther Seminary in Minneapolis, suggested that instead of preaching a doctrinal sermon, attempting to explain the mystery of the Trinity, preachers could simply talk about God. So that's what I'm going to do. If you want to read of my doctrine of the Trinity sermons, let me know and I can send you some, but for now, I am going to preach about God.

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, 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.

I can see why the people who choose the lectionary passages picked this one for Trinity Sunday. It's not too often that all three persons of the Trinity are mentioned in a few short verses of Scripture.

After Pentecost, after we read about faith shared and spread, Paul strips the Gospel down to what faith means for us. Commentator Sarah Hearer Lancaster compares these verses to a confession, rather than an argument, because they express Paul's deeply held conviction, rather than building a case for that conviction¹.

Paul's conviction is that we are connected to God. Ultimately, faith is about connection.

- The connection of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit to one another,
 - Our connection to God, which we experience through God's creation, through the words and witness of Jesus in the world, through the Spirit encountering us in other believers
 - Our connection to each other
- and, finally, the connection between suffering and hope.

¹ Hearer Lancaster, Sarah. *Romans. Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Westminster John Knox, Louisville, KY, 2015.

Paul recognizes that in the world there is suffering and there is also hope. Sometimes we cannot see how to get from one to the other. But miraculously, Paul is able to carve that path, a path out of the dense forest of suffering into the bright, clear, meadow of hope.

How is he able to do that?

By our connection to God.

Through God's love, poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, hope will not disappoint us, Paul proclaims.

The original Greek from Paul's letter reads literally: hope will not make us ashamed.

As Christians, despite everything the world tells us, we still hope. And I love the idea of hope not leaving us ashamed. We will not be ashamed to have hope because ultimately hope will prevail.

We can have confidence in hope because the Holy Spirit has poured God's love into our hearts- into the core of our being. This fullness of love is a witness to our relationship with God, the faithfulness of God, and the hope of God's glory.

Most of you have heard me talk about Kate Bowler, a church historian who was diagnosed with incurable cancer at age 35. Recently she gave a TED talk about her experience². As I watched it, I couldn't help but think about this passage as she talked about her experience with suffering, and where it led her. She said this:

"The other day, I was reading the findings of the Near Death Experience Research Foundation, and yes, there is such a thing. People were interviewed about their brushes with death in all kinds of circumstances: car accidents, labor and delivery, suicides. And many reported the same odd thing: love.

When I was sure that I was going to die, I didn't feel angry, I felt loved. In a time in which I should have felt abandoned by God, I was not reduced to ashes, I felt like I was floating, floating on the love and prayers of all those who surrounded me.

When they sat beside me, hand in hand, my own suffering began to feel like it had revealed to me the suffering of others; I had entered the world of people who were just like me."

The larger world, and our own individual worlds, are jolted by events that are wonderful and terrible, gorgeous and tragic. We cannot reconcile that, but that does not mean that joy and tragedy cancel each other out.

² https://www.ted.com/talks/kate_bowler_everything_happens_for_a_reason_and_other_lies_i_ve_loved/footnotes#t-718878

Life will break your heart, Bowler says. I believe that in the darkness, even there, there will be beauty and there will be love. Having or seeking God's peace does not ensure the absence of suffering but it does ensure the presence of love.

Paul's words show that having God's peace, while not preventing suffering, can provide a different perspective on suffering.

Even when circumstances do not improve, they cannot undermine hope.

This hope is what we boast in.

It's uncomfortable for me to read this part of the passage, to tell you to boast in your sufferings. But boasting is not about us, but about God. About what God has done and what God is doing. The point to see is that we should focus our boasting only on what God is doing *in* us with these circumstances, rather than on our own accomplishment.

In the best of circumstances, one thing that acute suffering can bring is a deep sense of connection. As Kate Bowler said, she entered a world of people just like her.

Throughout Romans Paul makes complex theological arguments, the content of which have been analyzed, parsed and commented upon for generations of Christian history. I was so glad to encounter this passage from chapter five that I hadn't read in a long time because it doesn't feel like Paul is standing in front of a crowd making an argument, it feels like he's extending a hand. Like he's reaching down to the followers of Jesus who are in the depths of despair and reminding them who God is. God, who they've staked their being on, who they've promised to follow despite an entire empire telling them to do the complete opposite, is God who does not abandon us but instead pours love into our hearts.

Paul reminds us that we know God through Jesus, through his ministry and sacrifice and resurrection. And we know God through the Spirit who is present with us even now. Even in suffering, Paul says, do not forget **who God is**. The one who will not leave us ashamed to hope, the one who will not abandon us. The one whose love is poured into our hearts, the place of our deepest sufferings, by the incredible power of the Holy Spirit.

In the name of the Holy Trinity: Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of us all. Amen.