

Devotion: Wednesday, April 1, 2020

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.
– Romans 5:3-5

I'll be honest, the idea of "boasting in our sufferings" does not come easily to me. Especially now. I'm not saying I'm in pain or mental distress. I'm suffering like everyone else. Inside, "For the Cause" Social Distancing to "Flatten the Curve," Like most of us, I tend not simply to avoid suffering but, I don't want to admit even to myself that I'm struggling, not wanting to appear weak in a culture that defines strength in terms of power rather than weakness or suffering.

But the Apostle Paul doesn't seem to share any of my problems with struggles, Rather, he believes that suffering is just part of life and, when approached from the point of view of faith, can actually lead to growth in faith and confidence.

But – and this is super-important to notice – that does not mean Paul is telling us to suffer for suffering's sake or that he believes God intends for us to suffer. Rather, Paul tells us that we worship a God who surprises us by showing up to meet us right in the midst of our weakness, pain, and suffering. This was a surprise to his first-century audience – and is likely surprising to us as well – because we tend to think about God in terms of strength and power and might, and so we assume that's what God looks for in us

God, it turns out, is not waiting until we become good enough, or strong enough, or righteous enough, to come to us. Rather, God comes to meet us in our weakness and struggles in order to comfort us, strengthen us, and equip us to comfort and strengthen others.

So, what can we take away from Paul's letter to the Romans?

First, if you are feeling anxious or stressed or frightened, not only are you not alone – this is a pretty normal set of responses to a pandemic! – but you are also not somehow falling short or failing others. Rather, you are being honest, facing what is difficult and being truthful about the dramatic and challenging nature of our circumstances.

Second, let's remind each other that God chooses to meet us precisely in our weakness so that we know that God *always* loves and accepts *every part of us*– even the parts we have a hard time accepting and loving. This, I think, is what Paul means by saying that suffering can lead to endurance, and endurance to character, and character to hope. Because when you realize God is with you and for you – that God is *always* on your side – then you find a way not simply to survive challenges but even persevere and flourish. Sometimes, in fact, it's only when things are most difficult that we recognize God's presence most powerfully.

Hopefully, in the near future, we will be able to gather digitally in worship, I'm working on that. But, please continue to reach out to each other in the variety of ways possible, and continue to

support each other in the confidence that *“God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”*

We will get through this. And we will get through it together. And when we do, we may be surprised that we have grown in our faith, confidence, and awareness of God’s amazing and sustaining grace!

Let us pray:

Lord, bless us, if it may be, in all our innocent endeavors. If it may not, give us the strength to encounter what is to come, that we be brave in peril, constant in tribulation, temperate in wrath and in all changes of fortune, and, down to the gates of death, loyal and loving, one to another. As the clay to the potter, as the windmill to the wind, as children of their sire, we beg of you this help and mercy for Christ's sake.--Robert Louis Stevenson

Stay Safe, God Bless

Pastor Jack