

(Romans 5:1-5 NRSV)

¹ Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² 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. ³ And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ 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.

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Hope Does Not Disappoint Us

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Text: Romans 5:1-5

It's a good thing Paul became the missionary to the gentiles. It's a good thing he was the one to work the Graeco-Roman side of the street. It's a good thing, because Paul talked the language of a Greek, of those schooled in rhetoric and philosophy.

Paul's Christian theology is filled with Greek wisdom. For example, his idea that the church community is made up of many different and complementary parts, like the human body, has become one of the most often quoted notions of Christian community. Today it serves as a very important way to describe the value of diversity among us. It came directly, without much change at all, from the Greek polis. The Greek city, the philosophers said, was made up of many parts, each different, each contributing, each important.

In our reading today we can hear another Greek commonplace. Paul says that suffering isn't so bad. Indeed, he says he boasts in suffering because suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character. Probably few of us have escaped hearing similar words, handed all the way down from Paul to our parents. Of course school is hard, we were told, but it's good for you. Working hard at something you don't like, like school, produces character. We've all heard it. Probably we've all said it. It's as much a part of every parent's myth arsenal as walking ten miles to school through the snowdrifts is.

But there is a problem. There is a problem with glorifying suffering and hardship.

Would you tell someone who has just lost a loved one that their suffering is good for them? How about someone who has just lost a job? How about a Jew who was in a Nazi concentration camp? Telling someone their suffering is good for them is risky business, and the risk of arrogance is not the smallest risk involved.

Today, as we face the ramifications of welfare reform, there are some who argue that it is better for people if they are left hungry and impoverished. It builds character. It fosters independence. It motivates people to better themselves. And while the desire to improve oneself can be a very good motivator, it smacks of insincerity in the welfare debate. To a one it is those who have never had to worry

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where their next meal was coming from who are so vocally supportive of this character-building logic for those without enough to eat.

The trouble with common sense and common wisdom is that they are not as universally wise or sensible as they sound at first hearing.

Nonetheless, Paul is onto something. It's a good thing Paul is working among those who share his metaphors. But Paul escapes the limitations of his Greek influenced proverbs because he adds a couple of things, God and love, to the equation. Paul starts, and the beginning and the end for Paul theologically, is where this morning's passage ends. There Paul says, "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

In my office, on a small table, I have a porcelain statue of the Buddhist Goddess Kwan Yin. Kwan Yin is known as the Bodhistava or Buddha of compassion. She is almost always shown, as she is in my statue, holding up a vase out of which she is pouring love and compassion. I keep her there for those who come to my office, for many are in need of compassion. It's not so much because I attract those who need compassion, but, rather, that so many of us do. And, so, I keep her there, also, to remind me that as a Christian I, too, have a God who pours out love, pours it out directly into my broken and bruised heart. Our God washes the worn and weary spirit with compassion in an unmistakable act of healing.

Beginning here, we can draw a distinction, a valuable distinction between pain and suffering. They look alike, but they are not.

The loss of your job – that is painful. The panicky feeling that you'll never get another job, that no one respects you and that you have no worth – that's suffering.

The gut wrenching death of a loved one – that's painful. The response of a deep and staggering loneliness that consumes every moment and makes life seem like it's not worth living – that's suffering.

The agony of a divorce – that's painful. The overwhelming feelings of depression, self-doubt and rage that often accompany a divorce – that's suffering.

Every pain has the potential to become suffering. Indeed, I know of no one who has missed that particular trip. Perhaps it is a requirement of human development to go there at least once. St. John of the Cross called it the dark night of the soul. On the other hand, I think we all know instinctively that this deep suffering is a dangerous place to go, or at least a dangerous place to spend much time. There we agonize. There we find despair. There we are vulnerable to temptations that promise us the world but instead seek to destroy us. There we are balanced precariously between life and death.

In the cow barns the farmers often used a three-legged stool. Three legs, it turns out are steady. There are three legs to a steadiness that keeps pain from tumbling into suffering.

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The first Paul identifies for us as the love that the holy spirit pours into our hearts. This first move by God (that's what grace means. God makes the first move. We don't earn it, deserve it. We don't even know it's coming) This first move by God, this pouring out of love and compassion is a balm that soothes the raw and burning places. I have sometimes seen people turn to God, seeking relief, when the suffering has been great. Over time, though, they turn to God in a different way. Once God has poured love into their hearts, and they have seen the suffering soothed, the greatest cause of suffering is ruined. Suffering at its deepest and most gripping depends on the real threat of total darkness. But once one's heart has been soothed by the ointment of the loving spirit, total darkness is eclipsed by light.

The second leg of the steady stool is human love and compassion. The Israelites were saved from Pharaoh, they were delivered from forty years in the wilderness, and ultimately they became a people. God's love poured out and saved them when they thought they were lost. And then God asked but one thing of them, remember. Remember, you were in bondage, God said. You cried out. I heard you. Remember. You were once a stranger and an alien looking for a land to call home. You were once nobody and you became a people. Remember. Remember that you were shown love and compassion. Remember so may you also show it to others. The second leg of the stool is the care and love we show one another.

And the third leg resides in us. When the ointment of love has flowed over us and in us, love from God and love from our fellow creatures, it points us to, it lets us recover, that true nature we have that is made in image of God. It allows us to grasp fully the sacred dimensions of our design, it allows us to see the holy blueprint of creation for what it is, and it becomes the third leg of our steady stool. This is the inner peace so often referred to in religious writings, the peace which Jesus says is beyond any peace the world gives. This peace enfolds even our most profound pain and can keep it from spinning out of control into despair and suffering.

Paul begins with the love of God, poured out like a healing ointment. Given as grace, that is, given without our even knowing we need it, never mind deserve it, given as grace it leads to moral actions of our own, and, finally, to a deep peace that can withstand anything.

There, once this part of the equation is in place, Paul's borrowing of the Greek aphorism that pain produces endurance and that endurance produces character takes on a whole different meaning. Pain pushed to suffering produces suffering, not character. But pain, held in the bosom of compassion and peace, may indeed produce character and much more.

Pain almost always comes as resistance to change. Loss of family and friends, growing older, watching your children leave home when you still think of them as toddlers, losing your job, losing your spouse, change in the character of your

neighborhood, watching the goldenrod signal fall is coming when you haven't yet had your fill of summer, these and a million other losses and changes, large and small, each causes a dart of pain. Scott Peck, the author of the *Road Less Traveled* has made millions of dollars by noting this commonplace, that life is painful.

The hitch is this: if every pain you experience threatens to launch you into full scale suffering, if every pain threatens to propel you into despair, if every pain threatens to knock the breath out of you, then you are going to avoid the pain whenever possible. I have seen a thousand people who keep a stiff upper lip in the face of grief for fear that if they let go, they will lose all control and fall into the abyss of misery. Fearful of suffering, many sweep pain under the rug, pretend it's not there, suppress it for another day, or do everything possible to deny it. Cryogenics in a way becomes a metaphor, freeze life to a stand-still in the hopes that one day you will be able to return it to the way you want it, or remember it. Maybe you know from personal experience this territory of avoiding the pain at all costs. I certainly do.

But if your peace sits on a three legged stool, then pain cannot threaten to spin out of control. Even in the concentration camps, those who survived tended to be those who took each day as it came. They accepted and felt the pain of it, but were somehow seen through by an abiding composure that overcame and outlasted the horror. In this case the solid stool of equilibrium allowed them to survive.

In less extreme cases we can turn our attention not only to survival, but also character building. Even in the cases of great pain – sustained by hope, the ointment of a loving God and an inner peace – we may not only survive, but we may also thrive.

How often does the loss of a job, as painful as it is, lead to new opportunities? Even the loss of loved ones, growing older, changing neighborhoods, being hungry, worrying about retirement and the thousand other painful darts which stick us may teach us new things and lead us to new horizons. Now, hear me carefully. I am not saying that all the painful things in life are justifiable. That is a cruel and unconscionable logic. As I said at the beginning, it is the flaw in the character building argument that Paul borrows from the Greeks. I am simply saying that painful things happen, right or wrong, and they need not be the end of the world. Indeed, they can be a beginning.

And, finally, there is pain we can choose to endure. When we are freed from the fear of suffering, when we are freed from dread that change will kill us, then we are freed to choose change because we believe the pain will lead to better things. It shows up as the courage of the battered wife who says enough and leaves, even though it is venture into the unknown. And it shows up in your life in many smaller choices, where you say, I will let go of what I am holding onto for dear life, I will let

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go, because I have hope, no, because I have knowledge that the pain is worth it, for I will end up in a better place.

Paul begins and ends with the love of God poured into our hearts. This love, along with the love it causes us to show one another, frees us to endure even the greatest pains. It frees us to endure, it frees us to thrive, and it frees us to be a new creation, a creation modeled after the holy image of the divine itself. Thanks be to God. Amen.