

## Romans 5:1–5

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.

## NEW RULES

We tell our children that it's important to play by the rules. Generally speaking that's a good thing to do ... whether we are talking about games or the laws that govern our country.

But, in some ways Christians are called to "hear a different drummer." When it comes to conventional wisdom, the "rules" that our society lays down ... sometimes, Christians are called to

break the rules in order to be faithful to the call of Christ.

Unfortunately it is very difficult to break with the rules of society. Instead, we turn God into someone who agrees what society believes.

Let me give you an example. Recently the popular talk show host, Glen Beck said that if your church talks about “social justice” that’s a code word for communism and you should leave that church.

Well, if that’s what you believe just stand up and walk out right now. But, before you go, consider these facts.

The Bible is filled with references to social justice from beginning to end. God is in the process of remaking this world by the power of God’s Spirit. From the Exodus, to the message of the prophets and Jesus to the life of the early Christian community it’s all about social justice! That’s why we say every week, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.”

Glen Beck has a wide audience. Why? Because he tells us what we want to hear! Don’t blame Glen.

He's just doing his job. He's just trying to gain a higher Nielsen rating.

But, we must remember that our faith is not in TV. Our faith is in the God who is revealed in the Bible. (And if that's true maybe we should spend more time with God's Word than the TV!)

## THE GOD OF THE BIBLE

But, let's be honest. Sometimes the God revealed in the Bible is just not the God we want.

Instead of the Jesus who is revealed in the Bible, we settle for a plastic Jesus who fits in with the wants of a consumer society. Instead of the Holy Spirit revealed in the Bible who turns things inside out and upside down, we settle for a tamer, more cuddly spirit that makes us "feel good." Instead of the God who created heaven and earth we settle for our own pet god, a domesticated god who resides in the church building but has nothing to do with the world in which we live.

The ancient Greek philosopher once wrote,

“The gods of the Persians look a great deal like the Persians!” And sometimes the god of the Americans looks a lot like Americans! The God we describe looks a lot like us ... only bigger.

We dislike suffering so we imagine a God who takes all our suffering away. Enemies make us fearful and angry so we imagine a god who will wreak vengeance upon those who oppose us. We want to have a positive self-image so we talk about all the good things that we have done and expect God to reward us for our actions.

The psychologist, Sigmund Freud was right. For many people god is just the “big daddy” in the sky that gives us what we want. That is NOT the God revealed in the Bible.

That’s why we desperately need to talk about the character of God because what we believe about God will influence everything we do here on earth. What does the Bible say about God?

In order to call ourselves disciples, our lives cannot be controlled by self-interest and conventional wisdom. Our lives must be shaped

by knowledge of God, the God revealed in Scripture.

The distinguished scholar, Bruce Metzger in his introduction to The New Oxford Annotated Bible wrote,

“In encountering the Scriptures, we expect to encounter God in Christ. We come to the Bible, not projecting our desires upon it, but rather expecting Scripture to project God’s desires upon us.

We spend a lot of time questioning the Bible, probing it, speaking to it. But, we should remember that the Bible is busy ... probing and putting questions to us! While we are busy reading Scripture, God is busy reading us!”

That’s why I think this Sunday; Trinity Sunday is one of the most important Sundays in the church year. On this Sunday we ask, “What is God like?” And on this day we proclaim the ancient biblical formula.

The God revealed in Scripture is the one Holy God in three Persons; Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

When we baptize we baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When we say the Creed each week we say I believe in God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

But, what does that really mean?

### A GOD WHO IS INVOLVED WITH THE WORLD

Let me say it another way. God was in Christ, and the Spirit of Christ empowers us to do God's will even today.

God is involved with the world. God didn't just create the world and just leave it. God loves the world, and God seeks to save the world.

God loves the world too much to just allow sin and corruption to destroy it. And the proof of that love is Jesus.

God sent his Son into the world to bring a message of hope and reconciliation. It was a very costly message. Romans 4:25 states that Jesus, "... was delivered over to death for our sins."

But, as we know, the story doesn't end there. The second half of that verse reads, "... and he was raised for our justification." In other words, through the power of the cross and the resurrection we can confidently say each week, "In Jesus Christ we are forgiven."

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus are a human picture of God's love. Sinful human beings did their worst with Jesus. They rejected and crucified him. But, it was no match for the power of God's love. God transformed a barbaric crime into a symbol of hope.

If that's true, what difference does it make? If we believe that, if we have faith in that, how does it change us?

That's the question that our lesson for today answers. Paul wrote,

"Therefore, since we are justified by faith" there are certain blessings that come to us as a result of that faith.

If we believe what I say each week after the confession of sin, that in Jesus Christ we are

forgiven, then our lives are changed in some significant ways.

## PEACE

First, we have peace with God.

St. Augustine said it well in his Confessions, “our hearts are restless” until we find our rest in God.

I was fascinated by President Obama’s story this past week. He said that he was shaving, and his daughter knocked on the door. When he told her to come in she asked, “Daddy have you plugged the hole yet?”

It’s terrible to have a hole that we know needs to be plugged but we can’t do it. That’s what is happening in the Gulf of Mexico.

And Augustine says that’s what’s happening in our hearts as well. We have a hole in our hearts that is God shaped. We have a gap in our lives that can only be filled by the peace of God.

But, notice that we can only find God and the peace of God through Jesus Christ. In verse one

we read that we have peace with God “through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

What does that mean? It means that the peace of God is a very specific peace. It is a peace exemplified in the life of Jesus. In Jesus we see in flesh and blood what Paul meant when he talked about “a peace that passes all understanding.”

When some people hear the word peace, they think of a psychological peace that allows us to go through life with no worries or cares. Peace is winning the lottery, or just being satisfied with the way things are, or an absence of conflict.

But, that’s not biblical peace. If you want a peace that takes you away from the cares of this world, you’ve come to the wrong place this morning. If you want a peace that has nothing to do with social justice, you need to look elsewhere.

The peace of God as revealed in the life of Jesus was a peace that no one expected and a peace that quite a few rejected. Paradoxically the peace of Jesus was a “disturbing peace” that brought division as well as comfort. It was not a peace based upon the absence of conflict. It was a peace

based upon God's kingdom, a kingdom of justice and mercy.

Do you think that they would call Jesus a communist if he had come in our day and time? Of course they would. Jesus brought the peace of God that disturbed the peace of the world. Why do you think that they crucified him?

But, this disturbing peace is true peace. It gives us confidence in the middle of conflict. It gives us hope. It gives us access to the throne of grace. It gives us a glimpse of glory. It transforms our lives and our relationships with others.

The translation of verse 2 gave us a bit of a problem at Bible study. In the NRSV Paul states, "... we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God." That sounded to us like Paul was bragging.

We could translate, "we glory in (or rejoice) in our hope of sharing the glory of God." God's glory becomes our glory.

We boast not about what we have attained.

We boast in what God has done for us. We boast about the fact that God forgave us even though we didn't deserve it.

## REDEMPTIVE SUFFERING

But, don't think this means we are somehow removed from the vicissitudes of life, far from it. In the very next verse Paul writes, "We also boast (or glory in or rejoice in) our sufferings."

Now what does that mean? We could understand rejoicing or even boasting in the hope of glory, but how can we boast about or rejoice in suffering?

Actually, redemptive suffering is an important theme in the Bible ... not only as it applies to Jesus but also as it applies to His disciples. I think the topic "a theology of suffering" might make for a very interesting Bible study some time.

Suffice it to say that the Bible does not avoid suffering or gloss over suffering. The Bible does not glamorize suffering.

Instead, the Bible talks about how God transforms suffering and uses it for good. God takes evil and

turns it into an opportunity for salvation. God takes the pain of life and uses it as a way to deepen our hope for the future.

I have to tread lightly when I talk about how God uses suffering. I don't want to suggest that suffering is good for you like aerobics or a good diet. Suffering is not good for anyone.

But, the story of Jesus teaches us that by the power of His Spirit God can and does bring resurrection power to bear on the pain of life. In our lesson for today we read, "suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope."

We do not learn to trust God in a vacuum. Faith is learned in the crucible of life. And life is often messy and painful. But, each struggle enables us to develop our Christian character. Each struggle makes the hope of the gospel more real.

## PROMISES TRIED AND PROVEN

An author told of a grandmother who began to read her Bible on the day that she was married. She read a chapter a day every day, and whenever

she found a promise she'd mark it "T" for try in the margin. As the years went by and the troubles of life multiplied she marked a "P" by each promise that she had proven by trying it in her own life.

In her 90s this grandmother had a Bible filled with "Ts" and "Ps," promises tried and proven in the crucible of life.

I believe our lives are an opportunity to try and prove the promises of God. It is in this way that the hope of salvation becomes a reality. It is in this way that we travel from suffering to endurance to hope. It is in this way that we come to know the God who is revealed in Holy Scripture.

## A JOURNEY TO A PLACE CALLED HOPE

One author likened it to a journey. He said that when he reads our passage for today he wants to quickly gloss over the suffering, endurance and character part and focus more on the hope.

He wrote,

"The end is what I like about the passage. I am impatient, focused on reaching that hopeful part.

My brain asks like a child's voice asking, 'are we there yet?'"

All of us are drawn to those passages of Scripture that give us hope. And this passage certainly contains hope. It talks about the promise of God's presence and God's enduring love that is poured into our hearts by the power of His Spirit.

But, this talk about hope and love will not become real to us unless we first take the journey that leads from suffering to endurance to character to hope.

I'm sure that all of you are at different points on that journey.

Some of you are in a place called suffering where all you experience is pain and sorrow. Some of you are in a place called endurance where you struggle to make ends meet and keep body and soul together. Some of you are in a place called character where the struggles of life have given you strength and a sense of perspective.

But, those of us who trust in the God revealed in Jesus need to remember these are just way

stations on the road; we are bound for a greater destination. We are called to look up instead of about. Like father Abraham we seek that holy city, a city with foundations, a city whose architect and builder is God.

And oddly enough it is during the tough times that we get our clearest glimpse of glory.

I read a story this week that reminded me of something that happened in my own life. A minister of Mexican heritage accepted a call to be a pastor in Illinois. His parents came from Mexico for a visit and while on this trip his 80-year-old father suffered a minor stroke that paralyzed his left side.

They took him to a local hospital where he stayed for a week. The pastor said that his mother refused to leave his bedside so arrangements were made for her to stay with him in the intensive care room.

Eventually his day regained most of his mobility and was released from the hospital later that week. However, he was still too weak to travel back home.

That Sunday the pastor led the worship service and as they were singing the first hymn he saw his family making a late entrance. His dad walked slowly down the center isle with his wife on one side and the pastor's wife on the other side.

He wrote,

“Seeing dad so frail brought up all the emotions that had been bottled up all week. My tears flowed so freely that I could not continue singing.

My ministry at that church, which lasted ten years, hit a pivotal moment that Sunday. When the members of the congregation saw me in pain, they ministered to me ... not from a distance, but as fellow travelers on the same patch of winding road.

They comforted me, and through their actions they taught me how to give direction to a lost traveler looking for a town called Hope.”

I can really identify with that minister's story. Quite often as I have served as a minister people have ministered to me. They have stood beside me

and comforted me in my time of suffering and sorrow.

And in a way those moments have taught me more about the Christian faith than any seminary class or seminar I have ever taken. I too have learned what it means to go to a town called Hope by making that journey of suffering with others.

What about you? Do you have a hole in your heart that nothing seems to plug? Do you have a pain that can't be healed?

In this place we believe in the God who is transforming a world of woe. In this place we believe in the God who can fill that hole in your heart. In this place we believe in the God who can transform suffering with the power of resurrection.

Won't you join us on our journey? There will be many curves and bumps along the way. It may take us longer to get to our destination than we would like. But, rest assured. We are on a way to a place called Hope. We can pray with confidence each week, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Amen.