

Romans 5

I'm up early on Monday morning-the arthritis in my back has really been bothering me for the past several weeks; I haven't even been able to swim for over a week now. I can only take so much anti-inflammatory medicine because it hurts my fragile stomach; like many of you I'm sure when I'm physically hurting it clouds my whole world; dark thoughts creep into my mind; I get more irritated than usual; and pretty soon I'm feeling pretty sorry for myself. Like I'm the only person in the world with troubles!

I walk outside on our back deck; it's already getting light at 5:15- the birds are chirping; I read the Psalm of the day-Psalm 56 and am particularly drawn to verse 8. It reads: 'You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle; Are they not in your record?'

There's the medicine I really need, the perspective I have forgotten: God is not indifferent to my sufferings; he is not so taken up with the vast government of creation that he has no time for me. Jesus made the same point when he said, "But even the hairs of your head are all counted." (Luke 12:7)

Those words from scripture help-and then as I begin my sermon preparation from Romans 5. I read these words from verse 3: we boast in our sufferings; or the RSV and the NIV translation: rejoice in our sufferings; Isn't Paul going a bit over board here? That statement seems so counter-intuitive; let's take a look at the text and see what Paul is getting at. What context is he putting our tribulations-literally pressures?

Having explained the need for justification(1:18-3:20) and the way of justification(3:21-4:25) Paul now describes the fruits of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ- the one who while we were still weak, at the right time, died for the ungodly.(Romans 5:6). These fruits are: we have peace with God (v.1), we have obtained access to God's grace and favor (v.2), we rejoice in our hope of the glory of God (v.2b) and we rejoice in our sufferings(v 3-5).

Paul's first point is that our justification brings reconciliation with God.

One of the saddest moments in ministry for me is to see the pain of a family quarrel grown so deep that family members won't have anything to do with

one another. Imagine knowing that there is someone there, only a telephone call away, who is one of your closest blood relations, and yet she won't speak to you, and you don't want to speak to her, or to see her or have anything to do with her; and imagine that going on for years and years. There is something deeply disturbing about the whole picture yet it is much more common than one might think.

There is a greater tragedy. A vast number of human beings live exactly like that in relation to God; but it doesn't have to be that way. In this passage Paul is talking about a reconciliation to end all reconciliations. He writes that since we have been declared to be in the right we have peace with God. Having laid the foundation in chapters 1-4, Paul is beginning to build the structure: a picture of Christian life in which all the ancient promises of God are coming true. And at the center of these promises is the establishment of a loving welcoming personal relationship between individual humans and the creator God himself.

This seems nonsense to many people today. How many times have I heard condescending critics of Christianity say how ridiculous it is to think that, if there were a God, he might actually be concerned with every single one of his human creatures at every single moment? Put like that of course, it does seem absurd; and yet the absurdity lies in the attempt to picture God as just like us only a bit bigger with better eye-sight. God is the creator of the world, transcendent over and above his creation, and yet, because his very nature is love it is completely natural for him to establish personal one-to-one relations with every single one of us.

So, through the cross we have peace/ reconciliation with God; but it gets better- we also are standing in grace everyday. Grace here is shorthand for the presence and power of God himself. We are regardless of our perception or our feelings surrounded by God's love and generosity, invited to breathe it in as our native air. As we do so, we realize that this is what we were made for; that this is what truly human existence ought to be like; and that it is the beginning of something so big, so massive, so unimaginably beautiful and powerful, that we almost burst as we think of it. When we stand there in God's own presence, not trembling but deeply grateful, and begin to inhale his goodness and wisdom, his power and his joy, we sense that we are being invited to become the true reflections of God, the true image bearers, the true sons and daughters of God that we were made to be. As Paul puts it, we boast (celebrate) in our hope of sharing the glory of God." This is the glory

that was lost through our idolatry and sin. When we finally inherit this glory, the whole creation will be set free from corruption and sufferings and share our new-found freedom, the freedom to be our true selves at last.

No wonder then that Paul can then go on to speak of celebration even in the midst of sufferings, the necessary path through which we travel as we share the father's work in this still-corrupt world. Note, he doesn't say we celebrate our sufferings (Christians are not masochists as some would charge). We celebrate-boast- he says in our sufferings. He sees a steady progression in which God uses our sufferings for the same purpose as he gives us his own presence and love: to transform us into the truly human people we were made to be. That progression leads from endurance (patience) to character and from character to hope. We live in a world that wants everything immediately; that has no stability of character; that wanders this way and that because it has no idea where it might be going. The gospel of Jesus the Messiah calls us to swim against the tide on all accounts.

What this means, as I am staring into the lush green of our backyard, my back hurting, my puny perspective warped around me, is that my present difficulties are not the last truth- that my future-my arthritic future- is wrapped up in something larger than itself. I am reminded that as a baptized person, I am baptized into the death of Christ, so that I may at the last achieve a resurrection like his. I am called to remember the faithfulness and power of God in my life up to this point, and to trust in God's faithfulness in the midst of my aching back. This is why Paul could write what he did-he knew that God was not just God when the sun was shining but also God in the midst of the darkest night; This is why he could write in 2nd Corinthians 4: 'So we do not lose heart. Even though our human nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure.' Or in Romans 8: 'we know that all things work together for those who love God.'

What Paul knew in this life and remembered in his sufferings, his tribulations, is that God's power embodied in Jesus is still on the move in the world. Jesus is still summoning and inviting and recruiting people to subscribe to his passion for God's future in each of our lives. In our sufferings we know that the God suffered and died for us-in the deepest love the world has ever seen- is not finished with us; there is more. Listen to our

passage in the words of Eugene Peterson: ‘We continue to shout our praise even when we’re hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we’re never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary—we can’t round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!’

The capacity to see in our trials, signs of hope is not a psychological trick. It is not a philosophy of the stiff upper lip. It is not the superficial optimism of the power of positive thinking. Rather it is a massive theological truth about the fidelity of God. The Church takes its very life in the Easter conviction that what was begun on that Sunday is powerfully underway today as God’s promise for his creation—including you and me: namely a new creation.

At 59 I doubt my arthritis will go away—I know God will never go away; I put my trust in him. As the writer of Lamentations put it: “the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end, they are new every morning, and great is God’s faithfulness. Amen.

