

June 12th, 2022

Romans 5:1-5 “Hope Does Not Disappoint”

Even though we’re past Pentecost, I’m going to give the Apostle Paul two more Sundays in the spotlight because the lectionary gives me that option and I feel like I can’t pass it up. It’s also because I got inspired at our Annual Gathering in Sacramento back in April and I’ve been wanting to go off-lectionary and do a series on what it means to be a part of this awesome movement called the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). But to do that uninterrupted I had to figure out what to do with June because there are two “special Sundays” where we’re doing something out of the ordinary. Last week it was our Pentecost celebration and on the 26th the Joyful Hosannas are coming here for a music service and sing-a-long!

So why am I visiting Paul again? Because we only got to see a little glimpse of him when we were working our way through Acts. We know that he was a Roman Citizen who was also a Jew which gave him the best of both worlds when it came to being able to speak to both Jewish and Gentile audiences. We know that he used to be “Saul, the persecutor of Christians” until he had an encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. That’s when he became “Paul the Apostle of Christ” and started his missionary journey up in what we know today as Turkey, Greece and Italy. We know that he was *dramatic* at times and wasn’t afraid to speak his mind or challenge authorities. He spent a *lot* of time in jail

for that very reason. Think about it, the guy was preaching that “Jesus is Lord” in a part of the world where you were only supposed to say, “Caesar is Lord.” While he was in jail he also liked to write letters to the churches up in those northern territories and some of those letters we actually have in our possession, and they became a part of our sacred scriptures. In those letters, we get to see how Paul developed a theology that eventually became the framework for the Church’s understanding of what it means to be the church. The way we govern our churches comes from Paul’s writings too. Other than Jesus, Paul is probably the most important and influential person in the New Testament. So, let’s dig into his letter to the church in Rome.

In his letters, Paul has a lot to say about the struggles of living the Christian life. And he should know, because for a time, he was the *source* of struggle for many Christians. But in many ways that makes him an open book about his own struggles and therefore the perfect person to help us navigate through this whole following Jesus business. One of my favorite passages in Romans is in chapter seven where Paul writes,

“For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want,

but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.”

And I’m saying, “Yes! Oh my gosh, that barely makes sense, but that’s me! Paul is writing like a squirrel jacked-up on caffeine, but I get what he’s saying! I know what I want to do and I have all the good intentions in the world to do it, but I end up messing it up anyway!” I know I give Paul grief sometimes about some of the weird ways that he frames things and how that’s led to some dreadful interpretations that have been harmful to women who’ve been called into ministry. But I’m telling you, when I count the number of times that I, as a pastor, have had to say, “What? No! That didn’t come out the way I wanted to say it!” I have to appreciate the difficulty that Paul faced being a flawed human being trying to communicate the gospel to other flawed human beings.

So here in this passage that Mary read, Paul is writing about weakness and suffering, and holds out the hope that at least suffering will produce endurance, and endurance will produce character, and character will produce hope. He’s saying that at least suffering has *some* side-benefits. Notice he doesn’t seem to be offering any sort of explanation for the *existence* of suffering, but that’s great. What Paul *does* seem to be saying is that suffering continues to be part of our human experience because God’s salvation of the world is still a *work in progress*. We are living in the time between

God's decisive victory over the powers of sin and death and the final fulfilment of the reign of peace that will be made possible *by* that victory. In other words, we're living in between Christ's resurrection and Christ's return. We're somewhere in between Easter and the fulfilment of God's reign on earth. We may say, "I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, and I'm going to dedicate my life to following him," but we also have to face the struggle of trying to live this confession out in a world that runs according to other agendas and other interests ... a world that continues to dole out suffering, misery, futility and death.

Wait, aren't you supposed to be preaching a sermon about hope? I'm getting there. But we need to talk about football first. Like hockey, rugby, boxing, wrestling, and martial arts, football is classified as a "traumatic contact sport" by medical professionals. According to the National Football League, up to 68% of players in the league may be injured over the course of a season. Over 90% of players reported sustaining at least one musculoskeletal injury during their professional careers. 60% of players have required surgeries over their career with 40% reporting a premature end to their days on the field. And of those whose injuries forced them out of the game, 74% are still being affected by injury.

Okay, so what? The point is NFL football players voluntarily subject themselves to suffering for the sake of their love of the game and for the considerable rewards that

go along with it. “So wait ... you’re a minister of the gospel ... one who has dedicated his life to following the one who is called ‘The Prince of Peace,’ and it sure sounds like you’re about ready to compare the Christian life, that’s supposed to be all about ushering in God’s reign of peace and non-violence, to one of the most brutal sports out there? Is this what’s happening here Pastor Jesse?” “What? No! Wait. That didn’t come out the way I wanted to say it! For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate and if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.” See?! The older I get and the longer I’m in ministry, the more I relate to Paul.

Let’s start over. There is hope! How about that? Is there struggle and hardships that happen throughout our journey of faith? Definitely. But they are mere blips in the overall story of promise and hope. Paul is just trying to say that through our suffering there is the possibility of drawing gain from that pain but through faith we can still find a path to peace through Christ. Yes, during this in-between time we can look both forward and backward and live with hope in the here and now. We do not have to prove ourselves in the midst of conflict in order for God to accept us. The suffering we face is not some kind of divine Navy Seal training where we have to make it through “Hell Week” to be on the team. Through our hardships and suffering God will accept us and open the wellspring of life to us. Jesus did not put his life on the line for only those who “deserved” it. It was not for those who had earned it or proved themselves worthy. It was

for the ungodly, the hard-hearted, the hostile and the bitter. It was for us at our very worst. Jesus died knowing that most of us would ignore his love and that even out of those who do respond to his call, many will drop out and say, “I can’t do this.” Through it all ... through our worst moments ... God will follow through on what has been started in Christ and bring our salvation to fulfillment. All the struggles we brace ourselves for are framed within the unshakable promise that God’s love for us will stop at nothing and that God’s all-encompassing grace and strength are more than enough to see us overcome anything and everything that would stop us or harm us or destroy us. Or as my colleague in ministry Rev. Ken Davis used to say, “God loves you anyway and there’s not a thing you can do about it.” So get off the treadmill of what you should do, or need to do in order to earn God’s favor. But remember that you can respond to God’s love, grace and favor with endurance, character, and hope.