

Endurance

Romans 5:1-5; (John 16:12-15)

Ute Molitor, First Congregational UCC Camden, June 16, 2019 (Father's Day)

5 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and 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.

When we explored this passage in our *lectio divina* group on Tuesday, a number of us had our heckles raised. Some words just weren't sitting right. For starters, Mainers don't like to boast, I'm told. And who is to say that suffering always leads to endurance and who is to say that endurance always produces the kind of character you want to be around? First, a word about words and context. Paul is writing in the context of a Christian community that experienced harassment and ridicule. This took place in a culture that highly valued preserving honor and feared shame. Now, the Greek word *thlipsis* which is often translated as suffering or afflictions can also mean oppression.¹ The Greek word *kauchometha* can be translated both as giving glory or boasting. At some level, Paul is probably saying to the Christians in Rome to not buy into a feeling of shame when others oppress or challenge them. The same is true when any other suffering occurs, as suffering is an integral part of any life (divorce, illness, loss of job, children struggling...).

I think it is also important to remember that, in contrast to what many other people in Rome believed about their gods, this is not a God Christians must appease or convince of anything. Remember how Paul's life was changed because he experienced love and grace as a gift from the very Christ and his community that Paul actually first tried to destroy. Paul had spent years trying to keep the law of Moses to justify himself before God and found that to be a dead-end street. This is also why Paul comes from a place of praise and joy. He is trying to pass it on. Just prior to our passage, Paul makes a long case about Abraham having been justified by his faith in

¹ Margaret P. Aymer in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3*, (Westminster John Knox: Louisville, KY) 2010, 40.

God even before the law was given during the time of Moses.² This is what the “Therefore” at the beginning of the passage is about. For Paul, God’s love precedes anything we can do to make our relationship right with God.³

For Christians, our hope is to be grounded in faith in Christ who endured oppression and suffering in an act of complete solidarity with all who suffer. To be in solidarity with God who embodied solidarity on the cross with us is not a meaningless enterprise, Paul says, even if it includes suffering. Paul invites people to be bold and to stand upright and rejoice given the love of God that is continually pouring itself out for and through them. They are to “stand tall” because God is standing with them in Christ and Christ is within them by the power of the Holy Spirit! This is indeed great news. And while we do not glorify suffering for the sake of suffering, we can consider how our experience can lead to endurance, transform us, break us open and connect us more deeply with a God who is right there with us and models the way.

Earlier in the week, I sent out an email inviting fathers in the congregation to provide reflections to a few questions about how being a father has affected them and changed them. It’s Father’s Day today after all! I was wondering what they might have to say implicitly or explicitly about the blessings but also the challenges, endurance, character and hope. Here are some of the questions:

What has been the greatest joy for you about being a father?

What has been most challenging or painful about being a father?

How has being a father changed you?

² For Paul, Abraham modeled the greater challenge: to trust in God even if it means leaving the life and status you know behind. Abraham and Sarah were asked to leave their home area when they were in their ripe old age to follow God into a new life in a new place. If Abraham had such trust and we now even have Christ within and among us as the source and model of this trust and love, of whom should we be afraid?

³ Richard Rohr likes to say that this reflects a shift from a moral definition of worth to an ontological one. Ontology is the knowledge of being. We are making a statement of who we are and Paul is saying that the worth of our being is a given. Our worth is not defined or attained by what we do. That is why I keep saying that nothing outside of the power of God’s love has the authority to define who and whose we are. What God desires is that we trust in this. Hopefully, we also come to act lovingly and justly because of the love we experience.

What does it mean to you to refer to God as father (even if God is beyond gender)?

What would you want to say to someone who is about to become a father today?

I must admit I only heard from two people but I found their responses very helpful for our reflection today. I am sharing portions here. John Davidson shared a life changing experience that involved trying to endure and be present amidst a great deal of suffering. John's first wife suffered from cancer for several years and he was the primary caretaker for her and their children. After her death, he was a single father for several years. John talked about how this experience of having to endure and be present to suffering as a father taught him a number of things:

- You learn what is really important and what is not.
- You become more sensitive to the suffering of others, whether this is about physical suffering or the daily challenges of being a single parent.
- Although your children may call you "special Dad" because you somehow need to be father and replace (in this case) the mom they knew, you realize that you cannot be that. You realize who you are and who you can and cannot be. (It takes a village to raise a child).
- You learn that if you cannot give your children all they need as a single dad all by yourself, how could God as single dad/ father be everything? There has to be more to God than being a single dad. (No wonder we imagine God as a trinity, a community within, bigger than gender dualities as well).⁴
- The experience also led to discernment about needing a future partner who was especially skilled in deep listening and compassion. (This is about complementarity whether we have a mom and dad or two dads or two moms).
- You learn to reach out for help from the church and the community. In John's case, the care offered by the church community played a role in his own son's decision to enter the ministry.

⁴ No wonder we think of God as a communal Trinity and many of us desire to hear feminine language about God as well. I do not wish to imply that two dads or two moms would somehow make inadequate parents. The point is that we need to bring a variety of gifts. The fact that we often associate them with only one gender can be a limiting factor.

I hear this as a story about suffering, endurance, growth with humility and hope. In the spirit of our passage from Romans, this a witness to standing up in the face of suffering or potentially oppressive circumstances without being overcome. I hear the kind of gratitude that can lead to giving glory to God whose love was poured forth in the midst of struggles with the help of others.

Roy Hitchings responded to the question about what he would want to tell a new dad and his reflection contains an image I would like to develop further. First, let's hear Roy's thoughts: *I would tell an expectant father that your world is really going to be rocked with your first child. They will go instantly to the center of your heart and you will love them immensely. It is a great responsibility to be a parent and also one of the greatest joys. Lots of work, much happiness, some pain and pride. You may not always agree with them, nor like what they are doing but you will always love them. Whatever happens, try to always keep communications open and honest with them. Remember, they have to figure out how to leave the nest that your family has created for them and that process is fraught with trials and false starts.*

I am particularly struck by Roy's comment: *They will go instantly to the center of your heart and you will love them immensely.... You may not always agree with them, nor like what they are doing but you will always love them...it takes a lot of work, much happiness, some pain and pride...Remember, they have to figure out how to leave the nest that your family has created for them and that process is fraught with trials and false starts.* I imagine that other fathers here will agree with this description, both the immensity of love and the trials to be endured that are often outside of your control.

Let me tell you a story about a 6th century Celtic monk that embodies these words. He was a monk who was considered a soul friend to humans and animals alike.⁵ He would often pray in

⁵ The content of this description and the story quoted are taken from Christine Valters Paintner, *The Soul's Slow Ripening: 12 Celtic Practices for Seeking the Sacred* (Sorin Books: Notre Dame, IN) 2018, 58. He was said to be so

an extremely tiny hut with outstretched arms. Because the hut was so tiny, one of his arms would routinely stick out of the window. On one peculiar day, a blackbird landed in the saint's palm with a small stick. It returned multiple times with more sticks while he was praying and the saint began to realize that this bird was building a nest in his hand. How could he withdraw his hand now? There was new life to be hatched. As the story goes, the saint spent the next weeks on his knees in the hut with his arms outstretched while the eggs were being laid, the birds hatched, and slowly and clumsily readied themselves to fly away while their parents tended to them. He did not get up until the birds had launched.

Talk about unexpected surrogate/supportive fatherhood! Talk about endurance! Talk about having to be flexible with your plans! Talk about having to grow present and compassionate in character (and how much easier it would have been to take turns with a partner)! Talk about reasons for hope! The bird instantly went to the saint's heart and he loved what was taking shape in his hand immensely. He stayed present through the trials and false starts of the young birds. He gave of himself to see this through no matter what the cost. He demonstrated what might be meant when Jesus says in our passage from John that all that the father has is his and will also be ours. What cause for joy and praise!

On this Fathers Day, perhaps we can think of God doing for us what this saint/surrogate father did for the birds as one possible image (to be supplemented by others). God is patiently enduring with us as we live our lives, letting us get to the center of God's heart, who gives us God's, suffering and rejoicing alongside us all, as each generation builds nests for yet another generation that clumsily learns to fly ever more boldly. God's endurance grounds our endurance and hope. Let us feel free to give glory and have confidence that we are not alone no matter happens in our lives. Since it is also Trinity Sunday, let us keep in the back of our minds that God as Creator (father/mother), Christ and Holy Spirit - three in one - does not have to do it alone and neither do we as we collaborate with God and each other. All thanks and praise be to God!

intimate with nature that a white cow came to offer him her milk when he was yet an infant. Later, when the saint was an adult, an otter would come and bring him salmon from a nearby lake.