

“Perseverance”

Valley Presbyterian Church – August 4, 2019

8th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 19:7-14

Rev. John Wahl

Romans 5:1-5

William Sloane Coffin, Jr. – a Presbyterian minister, peace activist, and the former pastor at Riverside church in New York City – infamously said that the opposite of love is not hate, but fear. Therefore, the product of love – both God’s love for us and consequently our love for one another – is hope.

In Romans 5, Paul says that “we boast in our hope of sharing God’s glory.” This word for “boast” also means “exalt in” or “rejoice.” But we are told to boast not only the glory of God but also in our sufferings. The message is not that we rejoice *because* we suffer, but rather that we rejoice *in the midst of* this suffering.¹

On a day when we wake up to the news of a second mass shooting in the span of less than twenty-four hours, our sense of hope is certainly tested by tragedy. Especially when the reality of suffering comes closer to home, fear is one of the wide range of emotions that we experience: along with sadness, confusion, anger, and disbelief.

However, for those who have been made righteous by Christ’s faithfulness, suffering is not a sign of God’s lack of favor toward us because God – as revealed to us through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection – shows us mercy and grace. “While we were sinners,” Paul will state just a few verses later in this chapter, “Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8) In the context of such amazing grace, our suffering works in the long run to strengthen the resolve and character of those who endure it.

Paul is writing here to Christians in Rome that he has not yet met, seeking to assure them that whatever they have endured can be used by God for good, describing it as something like a chemical chain reaction in which one thing sets off a whole sequence of actions: assuring them that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. In this sequence, suffering is the catalyst and hope its terminal point;² but in between, in the

¹ Mary Hinkle Shore from *WorkingPreacher.com*

² Elizabeth Shively from *WorkingPreacher.com*

intervening steps, we experience endurance – or perseverance – which creates character.

During our summer sermon series, we have been looking at the spiritual principle that stand behind the 12 Steps commonly used in many recovery programs. In so doing, we have been exploring the transformation from addiction – described in AA as “insanity” – to a saner way of living, which we have been calling “serenity.” As the Serenity Prayer teaches us, this sanity involves reflection and self-consciousness: the ability to wisely judge between those things which we are able to change, and those we cannot.

Step 10, which we examine today, speaks to the perseverance necessary in this ongoing process of self-reflection; it says: *continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.* One author describes it this way: “Step 10 makes recovery a daily practice, providing a basis for making reasonable decisions and carrying them out in all areas of our lives. We recover our integrity – our ability to decide to act in a manner consistent with our values.”³

Each of us, in in our daily lives, experiences impulses: we are tempted to act or react prior to reflection. Sometimes this means we speak before we’ve planned what we want to say; or we blame someone or something else without considering our own responsibility. Acting sanely, and with serenity, requires self-reflection: understanding that regardless of other people’s actions, we are free to choose our reactions, or to not react at all.

Therefore, Step 10 advocates developing this capacity to choose by making this process of reflection a habit. For some this is a daily practice – Ignatian Spirituality advocates the Daily Examen: reflecting at the beginning or ending of your day on where you have seen God at work, as well as the times when you have welcomed or inhibited the Spirit’s leading. Others choose to make a daily plan of action each morning, followed by a review of how things went in the evening. It might even be helpful to record these reflections in a journal that can be re-read later on.

No matter the specific practice, the point of the exercise is to become increasingly self-aware and to confront issues as they arise rather than letting them fester under the surface. As Richard Rohr reminds us, the core definition – or the

³ Phillip Z., *A Skeptic’s Guide to the 12 Steps*

main job – of religion is to reconnect us (*re-ligio*) with God, with ourselves, and with one another; and thus be healed.⁴

During the exploration of the spirituality of the 12 Steps, we have been exploring the thesis that recovery – or healing – is a different way of speaking about salvation. Paul says that we are saved by grace, through faith. Grace, however, is not only God’s action in Christ that reaches out to us – all of us; grace is also the place “in which we stand.” (5:2) God’s goodness to us surrounds us and upholds us and defines us. Our lives are shaped by this gift that we can never achieve, but can only receive.

Therefore, Paul tells us what life looks like when it is grounded in grace: not typically marked by earthly success or prosperity, but far more often marked by suffering. It is, after all, a Christ-shaped life. But grace bears fruits through this suffering; and those fruits are endurance (or perseverance), character, and hope.⁵

While the endpoint of this chemical reaction is hope, I believe that Step 10 speaks most poignantly to perseverance. When we take our personal inventories – whether we follow some formal process or not, writing it down or formulating them in our minds – we know the many decisions that we face daily, if not more often than that. We know that in the role of caregiver we are constantly choosing our reactions; seeking not to follow our impulses but to reinforce our deepest values of compassion and love. We know that we face not just one but many different temptations that would distract us or drive us off the right path. We know that we are recipients of near-constant media and messaging that can cause us to doubt and despair. We know the feeling of hopelessness in the midst of local and global problems of such an immense scale.

I don’t know exactly what you are going through. I don’t know of your sufferings, trials and tribulations – the ones you have or are currently facing – but I encourage you to maintain the grace which is a pathway to hope. Don’t allow the things that once were or still seem to be in control – but that Jesus has and now is at work redeeming – hold you back. Instead, let your endurance create character, and then character to create hope. For it is not only you who do this, God is at work in your life; God does not want you to suffer; and yet is even now creating something good out of even the most painful suffering.

⁴ Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water*

⁵ David Bartlett from *WorkingPreacher.com*

We proclaim this hope when we gather together around Christ's table to share in the memory of God's love poured out for us in Jesus. We share in the broken bread and therefore become the body of Christ for the world. We drink together and declare that this is the cup of salvation which is poured out for all people. Yes, there is suffering in this world and sometimes it seems as if it is all around us. But Paul's words assure us that the suffering we see and feel is only the beginning of this chain reaction that produces hope. God's grace – this amazing gift that is given for us to receive – is the place where we stand. And from here, from this table around which we will gather, we are sent into the world to proclaim that suffering does not have the last word; that even the deepest and most vile examples of deathly evil will not persist. Instead, we are given the freedom to choose how to react; to mourn, yes, but also to proclaim the power of the resurrection to new life – a life of wholeness and peace.

Friends, may God bless you in this sacrament you are about to receive and in God's light and love which the darkness will never overcome. Amen.