

"Rejoicing In Suffering"  
Romans 5:1-8

March 19, 2017

Third Sunday in Lent

I remember watching a television commercial for a weight-loss pill which claimed that, if you took this pill, you could lose a lot of weight in a short amount of time AND you could still eat as much of whatever you wanted. Or, another commercial for an exercise machine claimed that you could get into good shape without having to exercise long and hard – just a few minutes a day. Products with claims such as these reflect our society's distaste for suffering of any kind. We want the good results of something but without any of the unpleasantness that goes along with it. We want to lose weight without suffering the loss of cookies, ice cream and cake by faithful dieting. We want to get in great shape without having to suffer pain and weariness from serious exercising. We try to avoid suffering at all costs and usually get upset or angry when we can't.

We are currently in the middle of the season of Lent. Lent is all about suffering. Perhaps that's why it's not a very popular time in the church year. There are no pretty decorations, cute children's services, and the like. Attendance at Lent services is on the decline because we don't even want to think about suffering. But Lent forces us to consider the suffering of Jesus and our own suffering and come to terms with both.

Of course, we have a lot more serious suffering than just going without sweets or the weariness of exercise. People suffer from growing old and all of the pain, problems, and breakdown of the body that go with that. Growing old is not for sissies. People are suffering from severe illnesses and horrible pain. We pray for some of the most severe cases on a regular basis in our worship service. People suffer from sadness, depression, and mental illness. People suffer from loneliness and broken relationships. People suffer financially and have a hard time paying the bills. We even suffer for being Christians. We are mocked, ridiculed, rejected, and hated for speaking, believing, and living according to the Word of God.

As Christians, we try to figure out where God is in all of this suffering. We usually come to one of two conclusions. First, we may think God hates us and is punishing us. We have done something so horribly wrong or so horribly often that God sends suffering our way as a punishment for what we've done wrong (or all the things we've failed to do right).

Secondly, we may think God doesn't love us any more or He wouldn't let all this suffering happen to us. He just doesn't care about us and has abandoned us.

We deal with our suffering in a couple of ways. First, we may try to appease God. We try harder to avoid sin and even harder to do more good things. We may throw in more praying, more Bible reading, and more church attending. We hope that if we can just turn around our lives or get more spiritual then God will take away our suffering.

If we have concluded that God has abandoned us, we might just give up on God all together. We focus our lives on getting rid of all suffering and replacing it with pleasure, no matter what it takes. If a baby would cause too much suffering for an individual or family, kill her before she's born and you avoid the suffering. If illness or old age causes too much suffering for you or a family member, euthanize grandpa or kill yourself and even get your doctor to help. The suffering is gone for everyone. Drown your suffering in wealth, sports, alcohol, drugs, sex, or whatever gives you pleasure. Suffering is replaced with pleasure.

Our text from the Word of God offers an alternative way to view suffering. It may seem a bit odd. Ok, it may seem very odd. It is very counterintuitive to the way the world thinks. Instead of hating suffering and trying to avoid it or replace it with something else, St. Paul says, "We rejoice in our sufferings." Say what? What possible reason would there be for us to rejoice in suffering?

First of all, we don't have to worry that God hates us or is punishing us. Our sufferings are not signs of His anger toward us or punishments for us or our sins. God *was* angry at us because of our sin. God *did* punish our sin. But that's all been taken of by Jesus and His suffering. By His crucifixion on the cross, Jesus has endured the brunt of God's anger against our sin and the sin of all people of all time. By His death on the cross, Jesus suffered the punishment for all sin and paid the redemption price to forgive us and free us from death and hell.

St. Paul writes, "Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." By trusting in Jesus' action on our behalf and Jesus' sacrifice for us, God has declared us to be not guilty before Him. We have peace with God. The conflict between sinful humanity and a holy God is over. Our relationship with Him is whole and as it should be. That gives us great joy.

Still not convinced though? Think that you are not good enough for Jesus to have died for you or that your sins are somehow too great for you to really be at peace with God? There is no need to worry or fear.

God did not wait for you to be good enough to be recipients of His mercy. Jesus did not wait for you to become godly people before dying for you. Our text says, "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Jesus did not come to die for righteous or good people. Jesus did not wait for us to become righteous or good on our own. Jesus comes for sinners only. He died for ungodly people only. He came to die for us. In fact, while we were still sinners, in full rebellion against God, Jesus died for us.

Because we are right with God now through faith and because we are at peace with Him now through Jesus Christ, we do not fear the future, even when suffering comes into our lives. Instead, we have hope for the future. Now, "hope" is not some sort of weak wish that something might possibly happen. "Hope" is the confident assurance that what has already been obtained for us and promised to us will be given to us in the future.

The Word of God says that we have hope in the glory of God. In other words, there will be a time when we shall be freed from all suffering, receive a glorified and perfected body, and live in the glory and presence of God in heaven forever. This has already been obtained for us by virtue of Jesus' resurrection from death and grave to life and glory. And this shall be given to us when Jesus comes again in glory on the last day. So we rejoice in that hope.

We even rejoice in our suffering as we wait for that hope to be realized. It's like the pain we experience when exercising or working out. We are willing to accept it, even be glad in it, even though it is unpleasant, because we're pretty sure that such pain is causing us to be stronger and stronger and will eventually lead to our goal of being physically fit. We endure all such pain for the desired gain.

It is even better for us with regard to suffering in general. St. Paul writes, "More than that (i.e. rejoicing in the glory of God), we rejoice in our sufferings because we know..." He doesn't say "we are pretty sure" or "there's a good chance of", but that we definitively know. And what do we know? St. Paul says, we know "that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope." Suffering causes us to endure – to wait patiently. Waiting patiently creates a good character within us – a stronger personality after being tested and undergoing trials. And when we are stronger after being tested by suffering and undergoing the trials of life, that produces hope. And that hope - that confident assurance that what has already been obtained for us and promised to us will be given to us in the future – will never disappoint us or put us to shame.

Rather, that hope spurs us on. While Christians are not masochistic – we don't enjoy suffering, nor do we seek it out, we are not overcome by suffering, nor do we allow suffering to discourage us. We face all suffering with confidence and hope. We are able to do that, St. Paul says, "because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." God's love comforts us. God's love encourages us. God's love strengthens us. Therefore, the best way to be able to face suffering with confidence and hope is to be where you can be immersed in God's love and strengthened by the Spirit of God.

That's why we gather together in this place. After spending a week suffering in various ways and in different degrees, we want – we need - to receive and experience God's love being poured into our hearts. The Holy Spirit calms our troubled and guilty hearts through the Absolution given to us through the voice of the pastor. The Holy Spirit comforts and encourages as we hear His Word, read and preached, which always points us to the hope we have for the future through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit nourishes and strengthens us in hope as He feeds us with the body and blood of Jesus in the Lord's Supper.

So, do not fear or despair over any suffering that comes into your lives. God is not punishing you out of hate, nor is He abandoning you out of indifference. All the punishment and abandonment that sin causes has been accepted, endured, and overcome by Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. Take heart and have hope for the future. Death has been defeated and eternal life has been obtained by Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Live in hope, as you experience suffering in waiting, and rejoice in your suffering, "knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame." Amen.