

Romans 5:1-5
June 16, 2019

Suffering and Hope

It is always good to have a week of vacation, and I am thankful for the time away last week. I trust things went well here and I thank Mike Reynolds for filling in while I was away. I am not really the type to go to some resort and spend a week not doing much of anything, but I also don't want to schedule too much, making the vacation seem busier than normal life.

I went to the east coast, New York and New Jersey. Though I don't want to bore you with too many details, one of the days I went to see the ocean. I have, of course, been to the ocean before, in South Carolina and the Gulf of Mexico, but it had been a while and I thought that while I was close to the Jersey shore, I should spend at least part of a day there.

I sat on a "sand shelf," that is what I called it, a little bench-like formation left by the waves that made a nice little seat, and I watched the ocean come ashore for an hour or so. I don't want to say the surf was up, but it was a little, and I could look to my left and right both and see only water. It was a humbling experience.

It made me feel small in two ways. First, I was caught by the reality that on the other side of that body of water was Portugal or Morocco or England, depending on which direction. And also I thought of how many trillions of times over the millennia that the waves had come before, millions of years.

One feature of modern life is that we have discovered the vastness of the universe and that the earth, our little planetary home, is not the center of it. This discovery was, of course, quite a shock to the collective human self-esteem. Or at least it is a source of humility. That is not only what I felt sitting there in the sand, it is what I sought, because it is real and honest and true.

Pentecost

Last Sunday, as you know, was Pentecost, when Christians acknowledge the coming of the Holy Spirit. It memorializes the scene in Acts Chapter 2 when the small group of Galileans were at Pentecost in Jerusalem, 50 days after the infamous Passover, and they were suddenly overcome with the ability to speak in the languages of all the pilgrims there, and they proclaimed the gospel story, and many people believed it.

The Holy Spirit shows up in scripture in other places and there are other descriptions of the meaning of its coming. In the liturgical scheme of things, we are now in the time after Pentecost, which lasts from now until Advent. It is about the Christian life, life in the Spirit, with every aspect of our faith up for grabs. What is the meaning of the Spirit-filled life?

And today is also Trinity Sunday, because with the coming of the Spirit, added to the Incarnation, the biblical understanding of God's triune nature is complete. One God, three persons, an idea not unlike

the experience of the vast ocean, simple and yet so profound as to confound the mind's attempt to understand. It generates its fair share of humility.

Peace of God

In Romans 5 Paul says that God's love has been poured out in our hearts by this Holy Spirit, given to us, And because of the Spirit we have peace with God. These are not just words. It is a grand and glorious thing to have peace with God. We can't be said to have peace with much anyone else, certainly not with many of our fellow travelers through life. There is discord between people all around.

And with nature? Another part of my vacation journey took me through the industrial wasteland in that part of New Jersey that sits across from New York City. Have you seen it? Every city has a rust-belt side to it. New York is the biggest city so its industrial side is bigger. There is a price to be paid in nature for the modern industrialized world. It can hardly be said that we have peace with the natural world.

Even inner peace is a challenge. In many ways we are all conflicted, hiding ourselves from it most of the time and only at our dead-level best able to admit that we come to church to find resolution for the inner turmoil.

Because of Christ's sacrifice, which is an expression of God's love, we have peace with God. Peace with God is the foundation of all other kinds of peace.

A Little Pain

Peace with God hallows our pain, or whatever word you want to use for the darkness side of life, the hardship and the sorrow, the sin. If things happened as they should, the world's suffering would lead to death which be the final word. But because of God's grace it is not final, the suffering itself is the mechanism by which we are redeemed.

So we are preposterously taught to rejoice in our sufferings - *rejoice in them*. I'm sorry, I haven't suffered much in my life compared to many other people, but when I did suffer, I don't remember rejoicing. Nonetheless, rejoice, because suffering itself has been redeemed; it leads to perseverance. Now I know a little about perseverance, and it leads to character. I am interested in people of high character, people who are generous and kind and brave and honest and selfless to the point of sacrifice.

And character leads to hope, a hope that does not disappoint. This redemption is the meaning of the coming of the Holy Spirit, given to us, poured out in our hearts.

Hope

And this is our hope; not that we have peace with God *in spite of* our suffering; not that we have redemption *in spite of* our sin; but that our pain/suffering/sin *is* our peace with God, and our sin itself is the means of our salvation.

It is *suffering* that leads to perseverance, character, and hope. And it is the very essence of the world's sin that executed Jesus as some kind of an insurrectionist that *is* the means by which our forgiveness comes to us. How can we fail, in view of these astonishing truths, to be filled with hope?

Honestly, we do not seem to be hopeful, maybe some individuals are, but as a group, Christians are acting restless, defeated, running scared. We are divided from one another, not only by institutional differences or political convictions, but we are divided in spirit, not trusting God with each other. This distresses me.

But not to despair, and let none of us despair for any reason, even if what we fear to be the worst happens. It is not our despair but our hope that has the final word.

Some

Some Christians focus on changing the world, committed to social justice, the making of a better world for more and more people: the increase in equality, opportunity, fairness; the end of poverty, war, disease, racism, sexism, and discrimination.

Others are focused on personal salvation, on helping each individual ask questions about sin, about death and mortality, about eternal life; helping people learn about repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

Sometimes those committed to social justice see the failures of justice and the size of the problems, like the size of the ocean, fall into despair. And sometimes those who are concerned about personal spirituality despair over the apparent neglect by so many over spiritual concerns. And we should be concerned about both: the salvation of the individual *and* the transformation of the world, but let us despair over neither.

Because the Spirit has been poured out into our hearts like the ocean coming ashore in its everlasting persistence, and because our hope does not disappoint, our joy is somehow not only not destroyed by our pain, by the pain of the world, but enhanced by it; to the glory of God.

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