

Romans 5:1-5
May 30th, 2010

Assessing Suffering

“And not only that but we also boast in our sufferings , knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope.” Rom 5:3-4

Based on a plain understanding of these five verses in Paul’s letter to the church in Rome, after consultation with education elder Beth Foster and Associate Pastor Michelle Hwang we are changing the name of our Sunday morning education program from the traditional and outdated Sunday School to the post modern experiential hands on “Suffering School”. Since suffering leads to hope and suffering builds faith and the goal of any church’s education program is to build both hope and faith; we are going to introduce hands on suffering to the classroom encounter. These changes are in line with our last long range plan and the one we are currently developing. Previously we have spoken about the importance of increasing spirituality and using our current language, we have underscored the importance of Spiritual Formation. Now don’t worry these experiences in suffering will be age appropriate; and Fear not,

we will stay within the laws of our State; self flagellation will only be taught to those 18 and above.

I haven't gone mad, I am only kidding - I am pushing the limits on this paragraph from Paul's letter. If we take Paul at his word that we should boast in our sufferings because suffering produces endurance and endurance character and character hope – then bring on the suffering. Right? I have always found this part of Paul's letter a bit of a challenge. I also have as recent as this week, read articles and sermons that basically hold up the virtues of suffering. One Professor at a Lutheran Seminary in Chicago writes, "We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials for we know they are good for us."¹ I am not completely buying it and I have never bought it and frankly I don't really think that Paul was idealizing the benefits of suffering. So for a few minutes I would like to assess this whole notion of suffering as presented in this fifth chapter of Romans and put a finer spin on it.

Just as no one exits this world alive, the first thing we have to admit about suffering is that to a certain degree no one escapes suffering. We all feel pain in our lives. We all experience emotional

¹ Linda E Thomas in Feasting on The Word Year C Volume # 3 Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville KY 2010, page 38

ups and downs. We call go through lonely hard time and sometimes suffering is just awful. One of the unfortunate and enigmatic features about suffering is its unequal distribution in the world. Some people suffer a whole heck of lot more than others and there seems no rhyme or reason for it. I don't believe that suffering comes from God or that God imposes suffering. Suffering is not a weapon of God used to punish, teach or shape outcomes. Such a faith, such a theology would logically result in a picture of God as cosmic tyrant. Such a faith would fly in the face of the overall story of scripture. For God so loved the world that God gave the Son. I don't pray to the God that whips me, I pray to the God who comforts me when I am in pain.

God does not cause suffering, people do. Suffering is a result of resisting and turning away from God. When people ignore God's dream for the world; it sets consequences into motion and people, creatures and the earth are hurt. Suffering is very often rooted in injustice; someone's lust for power, wealth or comfort dislodges the well being of another. BP tries to save money by cutting back on maintenance by failing to install adequate failsafes and suddenly we have our nations largest oil spill. I cannot rejoice in the suffering that

will soon befall the gulf region of our nation. Suffering is rooted in The lusts and grabs of nations, of groups of people who “up end” the well being of another group. When Europeans settled the promised land of North America things became very unpromising for Native Americans. When the modern nation of Israel was created; the world dislodged the Palestinians.

God does not cause suffering; suffering is also the result of chance, coincidence and bad timing. There are a lot of forces at work in our world; sometimes the molecules just collide and there is suffering.

And yet Paul writes in his letter that suffering produces endurance, character and ultimately hope. In assessing Paul’s stand on suffering, we have to put his words into context. His first point is that we are justified by faith and we have peace with God through Jesus. Sometimes people don’t understand what it means that we are justified. We are, by our baptisms and our professions of faith brought close to God by God’s Grace in the birth, life and ministry of Jesus and God’s raising of Jesus from the dead. God in three persons, a community of love, pours out love for all people and all creation by sending the Son to reconcile the sorry state of affairs in

the world. There is nothing we can do to earn this love of God. God's love for us is a natural as the welling up of emotion we have when we hold our infant child or niece or nephew. God won't let go and the only thing we need to do is accept this gift. In accepting the gift we begin to discover peace. Again this act of love by God, to come after us in Jesus and sustain us in peace by the presence of the Holy Spirit negates any notion that God sends suffering as medicine or discipline for the wayward wandering human.

And yet Paul writes that suffering builds faith and hope. He even encourages us to boast about our sufferings. What is Paul talking about? Paul writes this letter to the church in Rome at a time when the church was being persecuted. Christianity, still in the womb of Judaism had caught on and many Roman leaders were worried about its power and they were doing their damndest to damn and shame the church. Members of the church were publicly shamed for their faith, many Jews and Jewish Christians were even exiled from Rome. Paul wasn't glorifying suffering, he was encouraging the earliest Christians to risk living faith boldly. Although they may try to shame you for your faith, stand fast he said. Yes it's going to cost

you to live the life of a disciple, but by standing up to persecution, you give glory to God and you actually strengthen your faith.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran Pastor who ministered in Germany in the 1930's and 40's, He was one of the few clergy who stood up against the Nazi's and even participated in an attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Bonhoeffer understood persecution and suffering as he himself was imprisoned and executed by the Nazi Machine. Bonhoeffer however drew a distinction between general suffering of injustice and chance and Christian suffering.² Christian suffering was about sticking your neck out for God. Christian suffering was about sticking your neck out for God who voluntarily in Christ Jesus suffered for us. Bonhoeffer's Christian suffering is what I would call radical discipleship, putting your faith on the line, living out your faith even when it is uncomfortable or dangerous.

According to Bonhoeffer Christian Suffering – radical discipleship was first of all voluntary. Just as the Son lowered himself and became human in the incarnation, Just as the Son subjected himself to humiliation and suffering in his arrest torture and crucifixion, just as the Son voluntarily served humanity; Christian

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer by John D Godsey in The Living Pulpit Volume 4 number 2 April-June 1995 pp4-5

suffering is when you decide to risk reputation and even safety in your service to God. Radical discipleship is when you decide to go out of your way to live your faith and it costs you. Some of us put our faith on the line in school – we refuse to treat others any other way, than as children of God. Some of us put our faith on the line at work, we make ethical decisions even if it adversely affects our status, our career advancement or our bottom line. Some of us put our faith on the line in our communities and neighborhoods. We go out of our way to be of service to others.

Secondly Bonhoeffer said that Christian Suffering is about bearing the burdens of others. Christian suffering – radical discipleship is about caring so much about another person that you listen deeply to their pain and you ache where they ache. You hurt like they hurt. God is the eternal being who bears our burdens. God’s heart is constantly pumping with currents of love and empathy for the pain of people and our planet. God hurts when we hurt. God’s Holy Spirit in us and around aches when we ache. “There is no suffering on earth that is not borne by God.”³ You see God couldn’t wish suffering upon us, because in that emotion God would

³ Ibid page 4

be wishing suffering upon Godself. That is not Jesus' message about the kingdom of God.

When we bind ourselves together as congregations as a congregation called Ark and Dove; we agree to act like God towards one another, we agree to bear each others burdens. No congregation would create a Suffering School, for that would fly in the face of every fiber of God. The church is the continuing presence of Christ in History, a body of persons called to be there for others and carry their burdens. Through the life of responsible discipleship, Christ actually takes form in us.

Thirdly Bonhoeffer says that Christian suffering is something we undertake on behalf of Christ. We don't risk for our own egos or our own satisfaction, we risk bold discipleship for the sake of Christ. Now I will admit and we will all admit that at lot of the things we do at church and through the church make us feel good and so perhaps we are making a subtle distinction. Sometimes you do thing because you know it's the right thing to do. Sometimes we do things because we know God is calling us to act and the deep peace or the satisfaction comes in knowing that we are faithfully responding to God's example and call.

Do we grow from suffering? Do we learn from agony and foolish mistakes? Yes when we are on the far side of suffering looking back, evaluating our maturity and life; we see the places where our mistakes make us stronger even better people. Yes when we look back at places in our lives where other people really tore us up, or situations not of our own making caused us a great deal of stress and anxiety, we see the skills we have acquired and the ways we have grown. Yes having been through very hard times we develop true empathy for other people, we even develop the ability to help them with their burdens. Yes it is true that when we suffer we want to go from suffering to hope as quick as possible and yet now we realize there are painful stops along the way to hope that if we had missed, we would be less.

But God does wish suffering upon us and God does not hope we all go to suffering school. God's intent is to reconcile and heal. God's intent is to draw us into the eternal realm of love where there is no suffering. While I can live with the consequences of radical discipleship I cannot bring myself to truly boast in suffering. In fact I believe this whole boasting in suffering bologna leads ultimately to a faith macho callousness. When we boast silly in suffering, we give

ourselves the excuse to ignore others and we wall our hearts off from true empathy; empathy that might encourage to engage in acts of radical discipleship and mutual burden bearing. Paul's words were no call to spiritual self flagellation; they were rhetorical encouragement for a distressed church. Paul's words were clever, creative and sermonic intended to make us think no suffer. My hope does not come from senseless suffering; my hope comes from my understanding that God walks with me everyday and on the real hard days God carries me.