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The Hope of the Present Time
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

“Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, character produces hope and 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.” Romans 5:3-5

I don’t preach on suffering very often. I was advised not to mention it by my homiletics professor in seminary. He said it would make parishioners uncomfortable and that would not be good. Best to focus on other things. And I see his point. People come to church or during the pandemic watch church services on-line for some comfort during these hard times. But on the other hand, here we have Paul, one of the early Christians who wrote a letter to other followers of Jesus in Rome writing about the important role suffering plays in the life of faith and perhaps it isn’t good to ignore that part of faith for too long, especially during this pandemic when so many people are suffering.

As always, whenever I mention this or other passages from the Bible that have been used by clergy and the church in the past to cause harm, I feel it is important to point out and apologize on behalf of the church for the past injustice and wrongful use of scriptures. Too often, this passage in Paul’s letter has been used to justify oppression of races, abuse of women and children, and other terrible offenses. That is not what Paul was writing about in this letter, and it was and is wrong of clergy to use those words to keep people in abusive or harmful circumstances instead of listening to people who are hurting and living into Paul’s words, which would be the first steps for helping people become free from abuse or oppression. These words have been used by the church and clergy to cause harm, which was and still is wrong. I do not agree with nor support such harm, and on behalf of the church I apologize.

Apologies without action or change are empty. Especially if they are lacking in empathy and understanding, two things that may be what Paul was probably referencing in his letter to the Romans.

Paul was forming church communities during a time when it was not easy to be a Christian. The government wasn’t behind the movement yet, and it was not socially acceptable to attend church. Churches were small groups that met in

people's houses, some even lived in small communities. These communities didn't have a *Book of Common Prayer* to help them organize beautiful liturgies; nor did they have constitutions and canons to follow. They were learning how to be a community of followers of the Risen Christ while they were doing it. And Paul was one of the organizers who took the time to think through the problems these communities faced and wrote letters to advise and encourage them in their faith. Paul endured a lot. He was arrested several times and spent time in prison because his message about Jesus was seen as a threat to those in power. He struggled to communicate his message, sometimes he was even run out of town.

All of which may be the inspiration for his words about suffering from his letter that is one of the readings for today. Paul understood suffering because he had suffered, and his faith and his experience helped him learn that suffering can lead to something beautiful, God's Kingdom here on earth.

In the book *Uncommon Gratitude*, Joan Chittister writes, "suffering calls us to conversion, a change of attitude that can soften our hearts to one another and opens our arms to life in all its shapes and forms." She goes on to write, "Suffering enables us to understand the other," she calls it "the ground of compassion, putting us in touch with the rest of the human race and moves us to re-think life."

There is wisdom in what she writes. Over the past few weeks, I've read a few opinion pieces in various newspapers from around the country that seek to take on the question of why there has been such a widespread and passionate response to the murder of George Floyd. It is deeply disturbing that this is not the first of such tragic deaths. And while many people were angered by those previous deaths and responded in ways similar to what we are seeing now, they didn't take on the momentum we are seeing in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder. This time there are not only non-violent protests, some leaders are actually listening and making changes that seem to be moving us closer to equality and justice for all people. The journalists are wondering: why is this response happening this time?

One theory they have is the novel coronavirus known as COVID-19 is playing a role in this widespread empathy and passion for justice and equality. Because of the virus, pretty much everyone in the country has had to stay at home. Those who can have been and are working from home, like me. But those who are not as fortunate have the stress of working with added measures of protection to attempt to prevent spreading or catching the virus, been

furloughed, laid off, or fired. On top of this, most of our entertainment venues were shut down. From movie theaters to concert venues, spring and summer events were canceled. Restaurants, hair salons, and most stores were closed and suddenly we found ourselves looking harder for toilet paper, hand soap, and flour than we had before in our lives. Those with secure incomes could hunker down, order on-line, live-stream everything from church services to family meetings to coffee groups, maybe do a little gardening and home improvement. But it has been harder on others. Parents suddenly found themselves having to figure out how to work from home while overseeing their children's on-line education. Those on unemployment have experienced an increase in anxiety due to financial insecurity, and many businesses, churches, and schools have had to figure out how to function on-line. Students who graduated found themselves walking a virtual stage at home without the full closure of graduation rituals and celebrations. Others suddenly afraid their livelihoods are non-essential have been worrying and in some cases over functioning in an attempt to prove their worth and value.

And while it hasn't been the same experience for everyone, most Americans have, in some way, shape or form, been suffering during the pandemic. Whether it was worry of getting sick and dying alone, or dying and leaving their children or spouse, or losing a loved one or a job, or trying to figure out how to stay connected to others, or adjusting to income loss, dealing with loneliness in not having enough direct human contact, people have been and many still are suffering. This suffering, the various journalists surmised, has led people to reflect and re-examine their lives, and this self-reflection is causing some people to change. Many people report realizing they have been pursuing selfish goals, or regret not taking risks, or regret working too hard, spending too many hours away from home and their families. Others say they are discovering a love for the outdoors, as they look for safe ways to get out of their houses. One couple reported they decided to retire early so they could slow down and enjoy life instead of flying too quickly through it.

These aren't the only changes the suffering caused by the pandemic initiated. The journalists believe it is our shared suffering that caused so many more white people to feel not just anger at the murder of George Floyd, but an empathy for African Americans and people of color who suffer injustice, prejudice, and all the stuff of racism in their daily lives. These white people are now more aware of the suffering of others and are doing what they can to

respond. They are rising up, joining with people who have been doing the work of advocating for and bringing equality to all people for years, and it looks like there may be some positive changes on the horizon. All in part, because of COVID-19, an invisible virus that is exposing so many of the disparities and injustice in health care, education, business, and so many other systems. Because of our common suffering, it seems, we can now face these injustices and feel motivated to do something about them.

Because suffering isn't all there is. As Paul wrote, suffering leads to endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope which does not disappoint. What I believe Paul is saying is suffering leads us to compassion and empathy, which can motivate us to do more than feel sorry for someone else, but see some of ourselves in the suffering of another and this connection moves us to make a life change that is in the direction of healing, equality, justice, like Jesus sent his disciples out to do in today's Gospel. This change isn't a one-time only thing, it is a path we walk for a lifetime, and that is where endurance, character, and hope comes in. What suffering exposes aren't problems that can be easily fixed with words of good intention, powerful songs, marches, anger or sympathy, but a lifetime of choices to make room for the other, the different, because we see them as fellow siblings in Christ, fellow human beings created in God's image and loved by God Recognizing this connection, we decide to work toward healing instead of harming each other.

In the conversations I have had during the past few weeks I hear people who have been engaged in this work for most of their lives speak with trembling excitement in the hope that this time, things really will change. I also hear people who say they hope this lasts longer than the next big news cycle. They've seen this passion rise up before, only to fizzle out as so many slip back into complacency because they could not endure. What happens next will depend a great deal on our endurance and character, how all of us chose to live day by day. Will we help make changes that make room for all people, or will we strive to go back to the way things were before?

Covid-19 is a terrible virus that has caused a lot of change and suffering, and I do not mean or intend to belittle anyone's suffering, grief or loss. But maybe not all change is bad. Perhaps it will be change that will actually bring the Kingdom of Heaven a little closer to earth, which is what we pray for every time we pray the Lord's Prayer. I know it does not all feel good. Change doesn't always feel good, and as Walter Bruggemann wrote, "God's Word never comes to

fruition as we see it or want it.” That alone can cause suffering. But the point is, God’s Word does come to fruition, God really does keep God’s promise of working with us to create a world of justice, healing, and peace. What begins with suffering might be the opportunity to let God into that suffering, which might lead to opening our hearts, minds, and arms and connect us to the world, and spurs us to not just care about, but care for one another, because we see the love of God in each other.

Perhaps, all our suffering is an opening for God’s Kingdom to emerge here in our hearts, our homes, our community, church, and the world, and we will see healing of hearts, minds, and souls. This could be the time.