**Sunday, March 12 Romans 5:1-11 “Timing is Everything”**

Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whomwe have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and 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. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person-- though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Ah, the vast mound of still dormant sermon ideas that fill my heart and mind and desk! I had such grand plans for today: a muscular skirmish with a pivotal text among all Christians. It would have been my best effort ever; it would have changed hearts. But as Paul himself says, timing is everything. And so I found myself writing, scarce twelve hours ago, the message we have before us, stripped of its original grandeur by a week of discomfort and exhaustion and bed-ridden non-productivity. It was Paul, again, who reminds us that the spirit can be willing, but the flesh be weak. And so my fervency of storming the castles for Christ amounted to having a weak and anemic cheerleading squad of one, but no football team. Some game, huh?

I really hate being sick, but hey, a perfect choice of text presents itself today, the rare biblically sanctioned opportunity to boast about my sufferings! In general, of course, boasting is not a habit encouraged by either Bible or Emily Post. Dear Abby would likewise frown upon excessive vaunting of oneself, or one’s kin, or one’s progeny. And yet, people are people, and a certain amount of boasting, particularly about your kids or grandkids, or all you have endured since last time we talked, a certain amount of this sort of thing is socially expected, tolerated, and even subtly encouraged. Boasting about one’s personal success is more often done non-verbally: the elegant new dress, the swanky new house remodel, the spiffy sports car that suddenly appears in front of your house. This seems to be the human pattern since the beginning of time; the beaded hide clothing from prehistoric days, caves that boast hot and cold running guano, being the first Neanderthal to have a cart with wheels, that sort of thing. Naturally enough, boasting is one of the habits that is routinely smacked down by the church, especially with pride being considered the foremost of the deadly sins.

Stands to reason, then, that if boasting about your *earthly* success is an issue, that boasting about your level of *spiritual* success is substantially more suspect, even in these permissive times. We are rightly leery of the self-proclaimed saviors, the folks who claim a direct line to God. Your pastor is certainly not one of those…more of a soggy kitten in that department. Even so…on to the text!

St. Paul, a founding father of our faith, was none too fond of boasting in general, but sure ‘went for it’ in today’s passage. He boasts, and a strange boast it is indeed, that we Christians have legitimate hope of sharing in the glory of God, of gradually becoming more and more like God. Stranger yet, he boasts about our sufferings, building a case that our earthly suffering schools us in endurance, and that needing to endure produces character, and character produces hope, a hope that, paired with God’s continual infusions of love and support, bring us right round to boasting of our hope of heaven. In Paul’s grace-filled understanding, we attain heaven through our ongoing relationship with God through Christ, and our suffering is just one of the tools. We do not earn our way through the pearly gates, but we may become more and more sanctified across the course of our lives if we allow suffering to enact in us its intended outcome, which is to give us stamina and endurance for the hills of life.

Now, friends, in our exploration of what the Bible says and means, it is *just as important* to understand what it does *not* say as it is to grasp its positive meaning. The temporal father of our country a while back, President Harry Truman, was famed for saying, “The buck stops here.” He was willing to assume personal responsibility for his choices and decisions. Likewise, we folk of faith are encouraged to take *personal responsibility* for our Christian choices and decisions, and so I must point out the historic error of somehow thinking that we need to suffer our way into heaven, that if we just suffer enough, God will take pity and let us in. Our God of love and fairness did not create our sufferings as something to boast about in and of themselves, but does apparently allow these realities for their core-strengthening properties. And so I would encourage us in a right understanding of suffering, not as a thing unto itself, and surely not as a thing to be sought and cultivated and used in boastful ways. It is analogous to weight training; the point of weightlifting is health and vigor and overall strength, not the acquisition of bragging rights over how many bicep curls you can do. Is there pain along the way? Of course. Is it worth it? Depends on the whole training regimen, right?

So suffering, rightly understood, builds our core of endurance and stamina. And in the process, according to both Paul and John Wesley, we develop character – you know, the stuff you do honorably even when nobody else is looking. There are surely other exercises for developing our character, but suffering is like weight training in this regard as well: we develop more surely in our times of trial than we do in our times of ease. I am not in love with it, but it seems to be the ordained way of things, that the alternation of suffering and joy, very much like the alternation of exertion and repose, is how we grow our spiritual muscles. And people of character are what the world needs, always have, always will. It really is like Warren Buffet says: "In looking for people to hire, you look for three qualities: character, intelligence, and energy. And, if they don't have the first, the other two will kill you." And so, we gather here seeking a deepening of character, knowing that we must hit the gym of life to build our spiritual muscles.

The most interesting of Paul’s strange boastings, though, is this idea that character is the foundation of hope. I think he means that hope, in the developed spiritual person, comes from the confidence built by enduring and overcoming, again and again, and our hope shades more towards a confident certainty that just a grasping wishfulness. I experience this in my music all the time; I have suffered the hours of practice, the honing of skills, the development of musical integrity. On a given Sunday, I might *say*, ‘I hope I play well today’, but that is not really very honest. I *know,* that given proper breathing and attention to detail, I will make beautiful sounds to lead and inspire, and there is no boasting in that, it is just the natural outcome of God’s delightful gift of music paired with disciplined training on my part. Talk about how timing is everything…I have not slept through this much fatigue for many years, and we have the time change this morning, so we all are a little slouffey anyway, I have not had time to practice, yada yada yada. I am not worried at all, because I have run Paul’s training sequence again and again for decades now. I think that all of our spiritual hopefulness can be like that, the natural outcome when we amplify God’s gifts to us through intentional spiritual practice. Confident hope is the payoff for being a Christian on purpose.

Och, well…enough of the heavy stuff; time to wrap it up, but I have one more strange boasting to tell you about. It is the saga of the four boastful wee lads who are gathered up in their treehouse, lazing away the summer afternoon, when the topic turns to their fathers, and how much money their dads make. The first three dads represented were a plumber, a dentist, and a surgeon, and the fourth boy wondered how he was going to join this particular fray, because his dad, well, he was a United Methodist pastor. So, the first boy tells with great relish of the substantial hourly rate charged by his dad; the second scoffs and lifts up his dentally gifted father; the third condescendingly suggests that his dad makes more in a day than the others do in a week or a month. But the pastor’s kid is clever, and simply says this: “I have no idea how much money your fathers make; all I know is that, when my dad gets paid on Sunday, it takes four grown adults to carry the cash! And now, let us receive the morning offering. Amen.