

In the reading from Romans that we heard a few moments ago, St. Paul writes: “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.” Every time I hear that passage from Romans I wonder if I believe it to be true. Do you believe it to be true?

Paul claims that suffering is not to be feared, and in fact it can be embraced, because suffering produces in us the ability to endure, and enduring suffering builds up our character, and with enough character we can hope, and having hope we will not be disappointed, because the Holy Spirit sees to it that our hearts have been filled with God’s love. So, according to Paul, suffering eventually produces hope. Has that been your experience with whatever suffering you have encountered throughout your life?

Suffering is something that we innately and with good reason spend our lives trying to avoid. No rational person goes in search of suffering. Yet St. Paul reassures us, that hopefulness can be the product of our suffering.

Fred Craddock, who was an enormously gifted American preacher, tells a story that was set in the rural southern United States during the Great Depression of the 1930. A father is standing in the yard outside his house, which was little more than a shack. He heard his two daughters, who were sitting on the old wooden steps of the porch, laughing loudly, shrieking with joy and glee. When he approached them to learn the cause of their delight, he could see that they were looking intently at a Sears Roebuck mail-order catalogue and admiring all the beautiful and brightly colored clothes.

The father walked up to the children, jerked the book out of their hands and said, "Don't you ever let me see you with this book again." The girls ran into the house trying to stifle their sobs. The father sat down on the porch, buried his head in his hands, and cried like a baby.

Why do you suppose he did that?

Was it because he was not a good father? Was it because he was heartless?

Perhaps he behaved that way because he was a good father and only doing what he thought was best for his daughters.

Having been born and raised in poverty himself, perhaps he had too often been bitterly disappointed in life and wanted to spare his two innocent daughters the pain and sadness of ill-fated dreams and false hopes.

Possibly he felt it would be cruel to allow them to harbor illusions about the beautiful clothes they saw in the catalogue but had no realistic hope of ever owning.

Maybe the father’s own life experiences convinced him that hope makes you vulnerable to heartache, and therefore it is better not to hope at all than it is to hope and end up experiencing crushing disappointment.

Do you ever look at life that way? Have you ever had a goal or ambition for which you earnestly and perhaps even desperately dreamed, only to have that dream dissolve or the desire denied? I am certain that all of us have had some of our hopes dashed at different times in our lives. Rather than suffering resulting in hope, as St. Paul wrote, perhaps we have known occasions when hope resulted in suffering.

In one of his final conversations with the disciples who had recently witnessed his suffering and death, Jesus assured them that when the Holy Spirit came, they would be able to see in an entirely new light and understand the purpose behind their own sadness over Jesus’ departure. Is that also not true of our lives? Is it not true that the deeper meaning of our life is often revealed to us only after we have passed through some tough times? Is it not true that only then do we comprehend how the difficult event – the suffering – graced us with growth in our faith?

Our life will always include some unwanted events that can teach us more about who we are. What was true for the disciples is equally true for us: suffering can gift us with helpful insights and compassion if we patiently wait for the Holy Spirit to reveal those meanings to us.

When we begin our worship service as we did today by singing words such as “Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty! God in three Persons, blessed Trinity,” it is a pretty good indication that today is Trinity Sunday, which always falls on the first Sunday after Pentecost. Over the decades I have probably read or heard hundreds of attempts by Christian theologians and preachers and commentators to explain the Trinity, but I am not sure that I am much farther ahead for all their attempts.

I can at least mouth the official doctrinal explanation, namely that the Trinity refers to three very distinct Persons - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or if you prefer, God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Each of the Persons is God. God the Father is God; Jesus the son is God; and the Holy Spirit is God. As we sang: “God in three persons, blessed Trinity.” The Trinity is not three separate individuals who together make one God, or three different Gods joined together. No, there is one and only God.

Let’s be honest: our trinitarian God – God in all God’s fullness – is largely incomprehensible to us. God is vaster than we can ever hope to wrap our little human minds around. But here is the good news. Any time that we try to make sense of the Trinity, we are expanding our understanding of God, and that should be a long-life exercise for all of us. Because if our understanding of God, our image of God, our connection to God, is the same today as it was yesterday, or last month, or last year, or 10 years ago, then we are shortchanging ourselves. In our ongoing quest to understand God, we should never limit God, never restrict God, never confine God’s goodness, God’s greatness, God’s grace, or God’s love.

Even if at times we are confused by parts of holy scripture, uncertain about some Christian teachings and practices that do not make complete sense to us, we should nevertheless persist in our prayers and persist in our daily attempts to live to the very best of our abilities as Christ taught us to live. All that really matters is that God will know that we are doing are best to live faithfully and hopefully.

Once upon a time there was a bishop who had oversight of a large diocese. This bishop decided to visit every parish in his diocese. He spent several years travelling the diocese on horseback, until finally he had seen every parish. Or so he thought, because someone then reminded him that his diocese also included a tiny chapel on a remote island far out to sea. Faithful to his mission, the bishop chartered a boat and set sail for the island. Upon landing, he discovered that the parish was a desolate spot inhabited only by three old men.

The bishop greeted them and began to question these isolated Christians about the orthodoxy of their faith. He wanted to see if they understood fully Christian teachings and doctrines such as the Trinity. The bishop also asked the three men, “How do you pray?” They replied, “We simply stand, holding hands like this.” And the three old men clasped their hands, saying together the only prayer they knew: “You are three, we are three, have mercy upon us. Amen.”

“What?” said the bishop. “This will never do. Don’t you know the Lord’s Prayer?” “No,” said the hermits, “Please teach us, O holy man of God!” The bishop spent all afternoon teaching the absent-minded old hermits the Lord’s Prayer, and when they had finally gotten it, he said his goodbyes, returned to the boat, and headed back out to sea, puzzling over these three old and very odd men on their remote island.

It grew dark, and as the bishop stood on the boat’s deck looking out to sea, he noticed that far away a tiny point of light appeared to be coming from the island and towards the boat. As the light drew nearer, it grew brighter and brighter until the bishop could see that it was the three hermits, holding hands, running swiftly on top of the water, their beards flying in the wind and their faces radiant with the light of Christ. “O holy man of God, holy man of God!” the hermits called out to the bishop, “We have forgotten the prayer you taught us! Please teach us again so that we may pray rightly!”

The bishop, amazed at the spectacle answered, “On second thought, I think that the way you pray must be just fine!”

We do not need to be able to understand perfectly everything in scripture and everything about Christian teachings and practices and doctrines. God will know when we are trying our best to live faithfully and hopefully.

It has been said that our souls need hope the way our lungs need oxygen. Because we are forever moving into an unknown future, we need hope to keep us moving so that we do not become stuck in a paralyzing fear of the future. Hope is God's gift to us in a world that so often appears to be a broken world. Hope keeps us moving.

I reserve the last words about hope for that great American poet and iconoclast, Walt Whitman. He likened God-given hope to a sheet-anchor. A sailor will tell you that a sheet-anchor is a large anchor kept on board ship to be used as a spare in an emergency. Whitman wrote: "Oh, how good a thing it is that the great God who has placed us in this world – where amid so much that is beautiful, there still exists among humans much grief, disappointment, and agony – has planted in our bosoms the great sheet-anchor, hope. **Amen.**"

**Trinity Sunday**

**12 June 2022**

**Rev. Dr. Keith Fleming**