

A PECULIAR LOGIC

Romans 5:1-11

A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham

The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

November 17, 2019

I'm willing to wager that, at one time or another, you have been a party to both of the conversations I am about to describe. In both cases the persons who are speaking have been through some awful crisis – a serious, debilitating illness, perhaps, or a horrible accident that has left physical and emotional scars, or the sudden death of a beloved child – something that has buffeted and beaten and battered them. In the first conversation the person says to you, “I just don't know how God can let this happen to me.” The second conversation is different, though the context is the same. The second person considers all the torment and says to you, “It's been hard, but I have begun to understand what it means to say that God's grace is sufficient for every need.”

As a pastor, I find myself in one or the other of those conversations with fair frequency. I consider both conversations appropriate. Indeed, I have come to have a good measure of empathy and understanding for those whose anguish leads them into the first conversation, for who among us has a glib or easy answer to offer in the face of torment and distress? Such conversations are never easy or comfortable, but I don't find them unseemly. Many times, I find myself grieving right along with such folks and can only affirm for them my deep conviction that God's heart is the first of all our hearts to break in the midst of such pain.¹

The second conversation – the one that remarkably claims and names the grace in the midst of the distress – invariably leaves me filled with awe and wonder. And it makes me wonder if I would respond so graciously in a similar context. The truth is, I haven't suffered much in my life. I've known aggravations. I've reached the age where my “Check Engine” light stays on much of the time. I've known limitations, particularly with my hearing. But I have not suffered. Not really. Some of you have, I know, but not me. So, it's hard to know how I might respond.

I hope I've absorbed some of the grace that more than a few people have demonstrated so clearly to me over the years. I hope to be a bit like one of my old sports heroes, the tennis player Arthur Ashe. When Ashe announced that he had contracted the HIV virus and then full-blown AIDS after a surgical transfusion, a reporter asked him if he was asking, “Why me?” Ashe responded that if he started asking “Why me?” at that point, he would have to go back earlier in his life to ask, “Why me?” about all of his opportunities and all of his successes. And he went on to speak about the blessings he had been accorded in his life, of the grace he had experienced.

¹ I learned that affirmation from William Sloane Coffin, Jr., who held to such a posture in a sermon, “Alex's Death,” preached January 23, 1983, at the Riverside Church in New York the week after his son died in an automobile accident.

In some ways, such graciousness is a gift, and yet I also believe it can be a learned behavior. I think it can be acquired as part of a discipline of gratitude and reflection about one's life. When one begins to see one's life as a steady rhythm of grace and response... grace and response... again and again, grace and response, then one can develop a graciousness as habitual as one's breath. I think such graciousness has its own peculiar logic. And nowhere is that logic more clearly defined than in Paul's words to the Romans about suffering:

[S]uffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us. (Rom. 5:3-5)

Christians have heard these words so often that we may have forgotten their strange progression. If I were to ask you to complete the sentence, "Suffering produces..." you might come up with a host of words that would never lead to endurance, to character, and then to hope. For some people suffering leads only to irritation that leads to bitterness, and perhaps then to a deep despair. For them, suffering leads to the question "why?" But for others, suffering does exactly what Paul suggests; it leads them down the path of humility to a quality of endurance; by steady perseverance it strengthens their character; and through self-reflection it leads to a discovery of God's providential care throughout life and thus a source of hope for the future.

New Testament scholar Beverly Roberts Gaventa suggests that we should not ignore that intermediate step of endurance. She argues that time is so important to the logic of these verses. In these days we live in a high-speed, analgesic culture; we don't like pain, and we will do most anything to see our way through the pain quickly and to regain a measure of "normalcy."² But by its nature endurance is not a quality we can develop in a hurry. Real suffering is not a momentary affliction; for some people suffering is an unwelcome companion for years. Through endurance in such a context we gain an unparalleled opportunity to reflect deeply on our lives, perhaps to see there the imprint of the hand of God, and therein to transcend despair, on the one hand, or blithe optimism, on the other, on the way to an enduring hope.

The progress, Paul says, runs from suffering to endurance to character to hope. It begins in living the life we are given to live, without denial, without avoidance. Some years before Jon Walton became your pastor, I heard him tell of checking into a hospital for the first in what became a series of heart surgeries. He remembered sitting on the bed facing the window and watching all the other people out on the street going about their business, living their lives, enjoying the day. He confessed that a deep melancholy began to settle in. But then a young cardiologist came into the room and, in an uncomfortably brusque manner but with accurate perception, said, "I know what you're thinking. You'd rather be someone else, and you'd rather be somewhere else. But you're not, so you'll have to deal with where and who you are."

² Beverly Gaventa, in remarks on this passage to the January 2002 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Danville, California.

Jon said, “He was right. Even more than I realized I would have liked to have escaped my body and been somebody else that day. [That doctor] reminded me of an important lesson. You can only be who you are. You cannot trade with anyone else. God doesn’t allow such self-serving options. We must live the life we are given and play the hand we are dealt even when life’s experiences make us want to escape.”³ Such self-discovery is the catalyst to the development of the kind of character that can, when combined with an enduring faith, produce hope.

Now... what if we took the same peculiar logic and applied it to the church? That is, of course, what Paul intended. He didn’t write his words about suffering to an individual. He wrote them to “all of God’s beloved in Rome” – in other words, to the church. And his argument was that the church as a community is called to be a suffering community. Those may seem like strange words in a time and culture where the church is more often pre-occupied with self-preservation and internal power struggles. It surely would be inaccurate to say that we in the church understand suffering to be our common calling. But Paul argues that it is our vocation nonetheless. We are called to suffer for the world’s sake after the manner of Christ.

When we are baptized in Christ, we are baptized not only into Christ’s life, but also into Christ’s suffering and death. That is to say, we are baptized into self-sacrificing service. Being freed *from* our preoccupation with self, we are freed *for* solidarity with others, especially those who suffer, whether in Santa Clarita, or Pleasantville, New Jersey, in the fire-ravaged communities of California or the besieged Kurdish communities of Syria, in the bombed-out neighborhoods of Baghdad or the typhoon-leveled regions of Japan. Such solidarity is not altruism; it is a condition of discipleship, and the nature of Christ’s church. Douglas John Hall says that we find our lives as we lose them in the love and service of others. That is the logic of the cross.⁴

It is only in that sense that Paul can talk about boasting in suffering. We boast in many things these days. We boast in our success. We boast in our wisdom. In our nation, we boast in our strength. With his peculiar logic, Paul reminds us that we should boast in our sufferings, even if at times suffering can almost crush our spirits or break our hearts. Because it is suffering that produces endurance, and endurance that produces character, and character that produces hope, and hope will not disappoint us, because that kind of hope is born of God’s love experienced in Christ Jesus, who suffered for our sake. If that is not the kind of suffering about which you can boast, Jon Walton said, it is at least the kind that you can commend, for it will mend your heart even when it breaks it.⁵ And the hope to which such suffering leads is thus grounded in something much larger than our own fragile faith. And it leads us to do more than we had ever imagined before.

³ Jon Walton, in a sermon preached November 15, 1992 at the Westminster Presbyterian Church of Wilmington, Delaware.

⁴ Douglas John Hall, as cited by Walton in a paper on this text, presented to the January 2002 meeting of the Moveable Feast.

⁵ Walton, 2002 Moveable Feast paper.

There is one thing more we must say [Michael Jenkins notes]. Paul does not provide us here with a general rule, an old adage of inevitability. Paul does not say that whenever the world breaks us, we will inevitably heal back stronger. Paul does not – indeed, Paul cannot – make such a general statement. It is simply not true. Some who suffer are broken for good, and they do not get well again. Paul is no magician, nor does he advocate a simple-minded optimism. What Paul does promise is that our suffering need never be wasted. Because we belong to God in Christ, because God has poured ... love into our hearts, that which we suffer can produce patient endurance. This endurance can form the character of the God who gives God's self away for us all, and this character produces hope, hope that will never disappoint us because God is more faithful than we can ever imagine.⁶

Those who have discovered such a hope through suffering and endurance sometimes do remarkable things born of that hope, things that others who don't have such hope can not understand... like affirming grace even in the midst of torment. They pray, they come to church, they sprinkle water on babies' heads, and bless all kinds of marriages, and keep the faith, even at a graveside. They take on assignments as missionaries halfway around the world. Or, closer to home, they spend a Saturday weeding the gardens for Harlem Grown, or an evening serving at the Hetrick Martin Institute. And along the way, again and again they encounter a Savior so full of life that even death could not keep him in its bonds.⁷ So, they continue.

My wish for you
Is that you continue [said the poet Maya Angelou]

Continue

To be who and how you are
To astonish a mean world
With your acts of kindness

Continue

...

In a society dark with cruelty
To let the people hear the grandeur
Of God in the peals of your laughter

Continue

...

⁶ Michael Jenkins, "Romans 5:1-5: Pastoral Perspective," in David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, ed., *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 3*, Louisville, KY, 2010, 42.

⁷ I borrow the substance of this paragraph from another sermon by Walton, preached March 18, 1990 at the Westminster Presbyterian Church of Wilmington, Delaware.

To remember your own young years

And look with favor upon the lost
And the least and the lonely

Continue

To put the mantel of your protection
Around the bodies of
The young and defenseless

Continue

To take the hand of the despised
And diseased and walk proudly with them
In the high street
Some might see you and
Be encouraged to do likewise

Continue

...

To dare to love deeply
And risk everything
For the good thing

*Continue*⁸

That is an essential part of our task as Christians – to continue. To persist. To endure. To embody that same love that we have known in Jesus ... the love that led him to “bear the dreadful curse” for us, the love that raised him to life again, the love within which our lives are kept – which so clearly reminds us that in Him our hope is never in vain. Continue, even in the midst of suffering, for suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not... *does not* disappoint us. At the least, friends, lean into that hope... and continue.

⁸ Maya Angelou, “CONTINUE: A Poem.”