

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Hope That Does Not Disappoint”
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Trinity Sunday—June 16, 2019

Lessons: Romans 5:1-5

Have you ever known someone who liked to boast about her or his suffering? I can think of people who have what I would call the attitude of Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh, always moaning and groaning about all their own problems, boasting if you will about their suffering and it gets old fast. People like that remind me of a sermon preached by my grandfather that I can still remember. It was a sermon about feeling sorry for yourself and I can still hear his voice saying: there are so many other people to feel sorry for besides yourself.

I thought about that sermon when reading this passage from Romans where Paul boasts in his suffering. Is that something we are meant to do?

Paul certainly knew about suffering. He'd been in and out of jail, beaten, shipwrecked, heckled, robbed. He'd known hunger and thirst and suffered with his thorn in the flesh whatever that was. Second Corinthians suggests that his letters were strong but his bodily presence was weak. Paul knew about suffering and he boasts in that suffering and at first glance that seems strange. We aren't usually very patient with people who boast in their suffering.

Yet Paul boasts about suffering because it leads to something more. Sometimes our suffering shows us that the only truly dependable resource we have is God. If suffering leads us to a closer relationship with God and God's grace, then that is indeed something about which we all should boast. So Paul isn't really boasting about his suffering. His point is not to belabor us with his aches and pains. Rather he wants to emphasize the grace of God which is stronger even than our worst suffering.

Here in the community of faith we have resources to transform any suffering. We know of a hope, Paul says, that does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

Of course, we live in a world where so much does disappoint us. Friends and family members have disappointed us. Political leaders have disappointed us. Sometimes in the midst of a great need the church has disappointed us. We know all about disappointment. Paul here suggests that God is the only hope that does not disappoint.

In the previous chapter in Romans, Paul uses the example of Abraham. God once promised Abraham and Sarah that they would be the parents of a multitude of nations, but years went by and they had no children. That was painful for them, but their pain, their suffering, did not stop them from believing and hoping against hope that God would be faithful. Sure enough, long after it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women as the King James Version so delicately puts it, Sarah did indeed bear a son and with the arrival of that child of laughter their suffering was transformed.

Look too at the example of Jesus, at his life and death and resurrection. He knew what it was to suffer. He was mocked, scourged, and left on the cross to die, feeling utterly alone, abandoned by nearly all of his followers and feeling abandoned even by God. Yet God transformed his suffering and raised him from the dead. In the same way, Paul wants us to know, God is at work in the midst of all our suffering making something good come out of it. We proclaim that we are not alone in our suffering, even when it feels that way. We proclaim that God is forever transforming our suffering. So we can indeed boast in our suffering because really we are boasting about God's transforming that suffering; we boast about God's ability to make something good come out of that suffering. Even in the worst of situations we can hold on because God's love has been poured into our hearts through

the Holy Spirit. We have a hope that does not disappoint.

This is one way that the church is wonderfully honest. We do not offer a get rich quick scheme. This is not a self-help program. Within the church we know that we need help. We know that we cannot make it on our own. We know what it is to suffer. We know all too well about broken dreams, broken marriages, loves, lives, jobs, families, aspirations, but we have a hope in God who has never ultimately failed us. God who gave new life to Abraham and Sarah can give us new life too. God who raised Jesus from the dead can raise us up too. God's presence is with us even in the worst of suffering.

Madeline L'Engle's book *Two-Part Invention* is the story of her forty-year marriage to actor Hugh Franklin, who died in 1986 of a painful form of cancer. In that book she writes: "It is when things go wrong, when the good things do not happen, when our prayers seem to have been lost, that God is most present. We do not need the sheltering wings when things go smoothly. We are closest to God in the darkness, stumbling along blindly."¹ She's right. Look back across history and remember the ways that God's transforming Spirit has been present in the lives of so many people, who may not even have recognized it.

Professor Brian Gerrish tells the story of a mother who prayed for her son for over thirty years and like many mothers here, would not ever give up hoping for her son, even when he went terribly astray. "Despite the benefits of a Christian education, the youth turned against his mother's faith and caused her fearful grief But the mother kept praying, long after most of us would have given up, perhaps with a few bitter remarks about the ingratitude of the younger generation. Finally, when the young man was thirty-two years old, his mother's prayers were answered: He became a Christian. And what a Christian! Saint Augustine became the most influential thinker, next to Paul, that the Western church has ever known."² Augustine's mother Monica knew the hope that does not disappoint. Her hope, like that of Abraham and Sarah, was based on God.

Peter Marty writes: "Hope has everything to do with what God wants in me; ... hope grows in the soil of the possibilities of God, not in the dirt of life's present circumstances. It's anchored in the faithfulness of God. Here's the real surprise about hope that makes God's power behind it so crucial: it thrives especially well in adversity,..."

"Hope is what keeps a cancer patient going when the oncologist has thrown every drug in the pharmacy at the disease, only to find nasty cells still multiplying. Hope is believing in your teenagers with every fiber of your love, even when their absence of good judgment thins your patience to the tiniest thread. Those who live with abundant hope never worry about not knowing what's around the next corner. They're confident it will be good for one reason alone—God is good.

"When Nelson Mandela received a surprise visit from his daughter near the end of his 27-year imprisonment, and he held his 'vulnerable and soft' granddaughter in his calloused hands for the first time, the encounter overwhelmed him. He named the yet-to-be named baby Zaziwe, an African word for hope. Why? 'During all my years in prison,' he later wrote, 'hope never left me.' Hope is what sustains us when we're not ready to give up on God beaming light into our darkness . . . or placing life into our weary hands."³

God is good all the time. In the midst of so much that can be disappointing, God is the source of all our hope. And if there are any of you today who for whatever reason are not able to hope right now, we will hope for you. We will call on God for you. We will continue to pray for you. For we

¹ Madeline L'Engle, *Two-Part Invention*, The Story of a Marriage. Harper San Francisco. © 1988.

² Brian A. Gerrish, *The Pilgrim road: Sermons on Christian Life*. Westminster John Knox Press. © 2000.

³ Peter W. Marty, The difference between wishing and hoping. *The Christian Century*, Vol. 134, No. 15. July 19, 2017. © 2017.

have a hope that does not disappoint because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Let us pray: Faithful God, pour your Spirit into our hearts that we might discover for ourselves the hope that does not disappoint. Give us the strength, the courage and the faith to keep right on to the end of the road, Keep right on to the end, 'Tho' the way be long, let our hearts be strong, Keep right on round the bend. 'Tho' we're tired and weary still journey on, 'Till we come to our happy abode, Where all the love we've been dreaming of Will be there at the end of the road.⁴ All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ our savior. Amen.

⁴ Harry Lauder, Keep Right On To the End of the Road.