

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor  
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

**Weekend of Sunday, June 14, 2020**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 11/Proper 6/Year A**

**First Reading: Exodus 19:2-8a**

**Second Reading: Romans 5:1-8**

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 9:35—10:8[9-23]**

**Sermon Title: “Boast In Our Sufferings”**

## **Theme**

*We are no longer God’s enemies but have peace with God because we were brought into a right relationship with God through Christ’s death.*

## **Text**

<sup>1</sup>Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup>through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. <sup>3</sup>And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup>and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup>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.

<sup>6</sup>For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

<sup>7</sup>Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. <sup>8</sup>But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

## Sermon

I think it was because it was Lent. It was already cold and dark. The Mahoning County Lutheran Churches had already planned our Lenten series and had only gotten one in as I recall when Governor DeWine and Dr. Acton issued their stay at home order. And though technically, they never ordered churches to close, Zion's Council acquiesced to their recommendation and we shut-down.

Not long after that, I made a home office in my basement man cave, which is very nice and comfortable – I built it – but there is no natural light, and it was cold. I spent my days and nights doing my pastoral care and sermon preparation and confirmation lesson preparation and so on, down there.

I discovered that since there wasn't much else to do, I worked more than I usually do, day and night. I got depressed and melancholy and recognizing that in myself and wondering if it wasn't true for you too, I created The Occasional Word, that random offering of little bits of encouragement that came in your email at any time without any notice.

Was our pandemic isolation suffering? I suppose it was because we were forced to upset our normal lives and all the things we do and enjoy that make life so enjoyable. I only know a couple of people that got COVID-19. I am quite certain their suffering was worse. Some of the reports I have heard from those who got the worst symptoms of COVID-19 have indicated that it was so bad they thought death would be a relief. Some of them were put on ventilators for weeks. Families were not allowed to visit to express love and encouragement and to advocate for their loved ones. Putting words in their mouths, I suspect they suffered a kind of mental anguish.

The Apostle Paul wrote about suffering in the Second Reading from his letter to the Romans. And in just that short eight-verse passage he used the term *suffering* a couple of times.

Paul knew something about suffering. He suffered for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In his writings he wrote that he had been imprisoned, flogged, suffered from exposure, beaten, stoned, robbed, mugged, shipwrecked, and gone hungry.

And those he was writing to, the Christian fellowship in Rome, was experiencing suffering at that same time. Due to a leadership change in the Roman government, the Roman Christians had been expelled from Rome. At the time of this writing, some had risked going back, but there was tension – real life-threatening tension in going home.

Paul wrote the Romans from Corinth about a trip he was planning to Jerusalem and along his way, he planned on stopping in Rome to encourage them. In this letter, he was also trying to solicit financial contributions to the church in Jerusalem.

Remember in last week's sermon I mentioned that in the First Century, Christianity would have been considered a cult? Well then, we can imagine how a Jewish family must have felt when their children left the faith of their family and joined a cult. The Christian fellowship in Jerusalem was experiencing suffering too. Persecution from the Jews who were the prevailing religion in the region, and persecution from the Romans, who frankly didn't care what their subjects worshiped, but to keep the peace with the Jews, persecuted the Christians too. So the Christian fellowship in Jerusalem was suffering.

All of a sudden, a couple of months in my basement doesn't sound like suffering.

Is suffering a good thing? No, I think we would have to agree that suffering is not a good thing. Today we have medicines that can be administered to alleviate the physical pain of suffering. We have psychologists and psychiatrists that can help us alleviate the mental pain of suffering. We have social agencies including Christian churches who exist to alleviate suffering in other ways, like assistance with rent, utilities, food, and medicine. If suffering was a good thing, we wouldn't work so hard to alleviate it, right?

But in the middle of this passage, Paul seems to indicate there is some good, some virtue in suffering. In the June edition of Eye On Zion, I wrote about taking advantage of the opportunities that the pandemic presented. Opportunities, you ask?

Yes, I wrote about how I drew deeper into the Spirit's tether with my devotions. When I come into the church on any given day, I am confronted with a host of issues that need my attention. Isolated at home, I had the time to dwell with the

LORD during an extended time of devotion. Scott Ackerman and I were already committed to the Lenten long commentary on the model for the devotion that I use. Honestly, the commentary was better than it would have been because I had the time to commit to it. I would have rather not been sequestered in my basement for months, but given that it happened to me, I made the best of it.

Paul wrote that Christians ought to:

boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup>and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup>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.

That is a lot to chew on so allow me to break it into smaller bites.

Paul wrote that we ought to know that suffering produces endurance. I don't know what suffering you have experienced in your lives, but if it was something you had to suffer again and again then you know the first time might have been frightening and unbearable, but the second time you knew what to expect and you knew would survive it, and it wasn't as bad. I've seen this with cancer survivors.

Sandy was a woman I ministered to up in Cortland who had had breast cancer several times. The first time was before I became her pastor and I am sure that diagnosis was frightening. But later, after I became her pastor it came back a couple more times, and I was surprised by her strength. She did all the due diligence: she had the best doctors, she followed all the medical protocols that she was given; she even did some homeopathic self-treatment and made changes to her diet.

But she was also a devoted disciple of her Lord Jesus Christ. She knew from her own life of discipleship and study of the Bible that *come what may*, her Lord Jesus had her best interests at heart. That didn't mean that she *knew* she would survive her next bout. But it did mean that if she didn't, then she trusted that the LORD had something better in store for her. Do you have that kind of faith and trust? Suffering produces endurance.

Paul went on to write that endurance produces character. What is character? Character is the sum of qualities that define a person; their thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

The amazing thing about Sandy was that the more she suffered, the more solid a person she became. She knew that she had endured the worst cancer could deliver and survived. It's not that she became cocky about life, but she just felt like she was already a conqueror. And that kind of maturity and solidness made her someone we all looked up to. Honestly, she was like the church's mother. You could ask her anything and with all humility, she would offer what advice she could.

Throughout scripture, there are countless examples where God allowed adversity and hardship, challenges, and tests. Was this to break people down? No! It was to build them up into living faithful testaments for God. Paul wrote that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character. And to that, character produces hope.

What is hope? It is a feeling of expectation and desire for a thing to happen. I am certain that Sandy wanted to live. Like many of us, she had family and kids and grandkids, and maybe the hope of great-grandkids. She wasn't wealthy or famous but had hope that she would be able to live a long and blessed life with those she loved the most.

How could Sandy, a woman afflicted with cancer many times, have hope? Because suffering produces endurance – she had survived before. And endurance produces character – everyone loved the woman she had become. And character produces hope – having survived so much, how could she not have hope.

And about hope Paul wrote,

**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.**

Through suffering and enduring and character-building and hopefulness, we come to a fuller understanding of the love of God. Throughout all of our life's experiences, we come to know that God is *more* than a god we can call to in times of trouble. The God we worship revealed in Jesus Christ is one who knows

suffering and enduring and character-building and hopefulness in the same way we human beings do and faithfully came out on the other side and promises to be with us, Emmanuel – God with us, in our times of trouble.

### **Raisin' the Bar Challenge**

Through it all, we become justified with God through our faith that is not simply pabulum, but road-tested, battlefield-hardened faith that yields peace with God. And when we have peace with God, we can face whatever comes our way knowing that come what may, whether we prosper or fail, whether we live or whether we die, we are the LORD's and that is necessarily and only a great thing, and more than a great thing, it is the ultimate thing.

I get called into the suffering of many church members and sometimes it ends in death. I count it as a high honor to be brought into a family's most intimate and vulnerable time. Sometimes it's messy. I understand that. I am there to remind them of all that I just preached to you. And to remind them that death is not the worst thing that can happen to their loved one. On the contrary, Christians believe death is the fulfillment of a life of faith and the threshold to life eternal with God. Their loved one is not simply dead and gone but is now sharing the glory of God.

And occasionally, I have the honor of walking with a person of great faith into that valley of death, and let me say, to watch them die in faith is breathtaking. And their courage and poise and humility and grace through it all inspires me and their family, and friends, and sometimes even people they didn't really know so well in life.

So given that we are all terminal – none of us gets out of this alive, ask yourself how you will live. Will you live in faith, trusting that no matter what comes your way you will live a life that honors God?

Will you trust God that suffering produces endurance,<sup>4</sup> and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,<sup>5</sup> 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.

Will you trust that suffering and enduring and character-building and hopefulness will only result in deeper knowledge, love, and trust in God revealed in Jesus Christ? If you answered yes to these, then you will live a richer, fuller, more abundant life even now.

### **Prayer**

Loving God, it seems strange to us to do anything but abhor suffering, but after hearing Paul's teaching on it, we can see in it the way that you nurture us into mature devoted disciples of your Son and our Lord Jesus. So if we must suffer, make you Holy Spirit alive and obvious in our lives, so that we may endure having our characters built up, and our lives full of hope. To you be given all the glory for whatever we might accomplish. Amen