

"Joy In Suffering"

Romans 5:3-5; James 1:2-4

Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church

June 25, 2023

This morning, we are singing two hymns which were composed by the same person. For our hymn of preparation, we sang one of the most beautiful hymns of the Christian church, "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go" by George Matheson- one of the great Scottish preachers of the last half of the 19th century. Not only a great preacher, writer, and composer, he was just as great a pastor and human being. He graduated from the University of Glasgow at the top of his class, wrote some of the most scholarly works on science and philosophy, was a celebrated pastor, preacher and poet despite the fact that at age 17, he had lost all of his eyesight. However, life was not easy for him. He never married and had to depend upon others to be his eyes for him. Yet, as we sang in the third stanza:

*"O joy that seekest me through pain,  
I cannot close my heart to thee;  
I trace the rainbow through the rain,  
And feel the promise is not vain  
That morn shall tearless be."*

No matter how difficult or private his sufferings were, the love of God and his close intimate presence provided him with a joy and a peace far greater than the pain that resulted from his personal trials. He spoke a great deal about the mystery of pain and that it could be conquered by an even GREATER mystery, THE MYSTERY OF THE CROSS. In a biography about him written by one of his colleagues, the author said:

"One great foundational fact of his preaching was the perfection of man through suffering. He shed many a light on the mystery of pain. He taught us that God meant us to overcome the pains of life, not by avoiding them, but by taking them to our hearts and passing them through our souls. We were to conquer all enemies by conquering all our enmity to them. We were to look upon pain as a friend (disguised), to be received, not as an enemy to be shunned. Man was made by God to become perfect through sufferings, not to be made perfectly free from sufferings."

George Matheson helps us to understand this morning one of the great paradoxes of the Christian's life- of being able to rejoice in the midst of our trials and sufferings, REGARDLESS of what or how punishing that ordeal may be.

Now suffering exists on many levels- ENTIRE COUNTRIES can be devastated through famine, plague, war or financial depression. When you see or read the news reports coming out of the Ukraine with city after city being reduced to rubble, where so many sons and husbands have perished and will never again see their homes, their wives, and their families, you have to wonder how the Ukrainians' faith and courage and spirit remain so fervent in the face of such unrelenting adversity, and yet somehow IT DOES. And we suffer INDIVIDUALLY as well. We suffer PHYSICALLY from the ravages of cancer and Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, from blindness and

other disabilities, from starvation and the common flu; we suffer MENTALLY from retardation and paranoia and assorted schizophrenia; and people suffer EMOTIONALLY, such as when one is abandoned by a spouse or repeatedly told they're worthless and no good.

Suffering can come in many forms such as afflictions, pressures, stresses, difficulties, illnesses or persecution. And then, of course, some suffer more than others. Although we lost a quarter of a million men on the battlefields of Europe and the islands of the South Pacific during World War II, Russia alone lost twenty million men, a ratio of 80 soldiers killed to every one of our own. Yes, we suffered, but how much more did Russia and Germany- the populations of which were decimated and whose land was reduced to cinder and ash.

The reality is that there isn't a single man, woman, or child who HASN'T experienced suffering of SOME kind. In response, we spend most of our time and energy in life trying to ward off pain and suffering, trying to insulate ourselves from its effects. We buy billions of dollars of bombs and military hardware for our national defense. We purchase billions of dollars of drugs each year to defend ourselves against flu and headaches and the common cold. We work hard to achieve financial security to stave off the threat of poverty only to end up doling most of it out to pay our hospitalization and nursing home care when we grow too old to care for ourselves. The truth is that no matter how MUCH insurance we buy, it only offers us the ILLUSION of security, for suffering is going to come our way whether we LIKE IT OR NOT. In fact, LIFE IS AN ENDLESS SERIES OF TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS from the moment we're born to the day we die- we get over one serious crises only to confront another waiting in the wings.

The REAL tragedy for us lies not in the fact we experience tragedy, pain and eventually death, but that in a world in which it is so common and to be expected, we take such a negative and defensive attitude towards it, that as a result of it we allow our hearts to become hard and resentful and full of self-pity, instead of seeing how such occasions can provide us with some of life's deepest truths. What our N.T. lesson tells us this morning is that there is ANOTHER way to approach suffering and tragedy when it knocks on our door, and that REAL faith in God can transform our brokenness and sorrow into tears of joy and hearts filled with hope.

Lest we think that the Apostle Paul in Romans 5 is just spouting off a lot of cheap optimism or positive thinking, let me remind you that few persons ever suffered to the extent HE did, that his prescription for peace comes straight out of his own personal experience and not from reading Robert Schuller or Norman Vincent Peale. He tells us in his second letter to the Corinthian church, what exactly he endured on behalf of the Gospel. He says:

"Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes (which more often than not killed a man). Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches."

If after all that, the Apostle STILL retains peace and joy in his heart, he certainly has something every man and woman this morning needs to hear. Eventually, Paul would be imprisoned a last time and be executed as a martyr to his Christian faith.

Too often, we have looked to God as the one who throws the life preserver when we find ourselves over our head with trouble. We expect God to heal our infirmities or fix our marriages or prevent tragedy from ever striking; he becomes our genie in the bottle, who with a quick prayer is expected to deliver us from harm's way. But when it DOESN'T work out that way, when we not only find suffering and tragedy in our life but that it even gets WORSE, then we harden our hearts and turn our backs on him. We figure that a God who isn't strong enough to rescue us from our troubles is not worthy of our allegiance and love. We expect God to come to our aid and make everything just right again, ESPECIALLY when we need him most.

But this is not a TRUE picture of our God, the God of the Bible, the Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ. On the contrary, Scripture affirms again and again how we shall face trials in this world, that life is often hard and cruel and EVEN UNJUST to us. To his own disciples, Jesus prepared them saying, "In the world you shall have tribulation." Hence, God's response is not to REMOVE such tribulation when it occurs, nor is it to remove US from it, but rather TO HELP US BEAR UP UNDER IT when such trials inevitably arrive. You see, God never promises to remove the mountain before us, but rather to help us over its summit. As Jesus instructed his followers:

"Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my load is light."

The image is that of a heavy wooden yoke around the neck of an ox used to pull a plow or a cart. Jesus is not saying that he'll remove the yoke from off our backs, but rather, slip in beside us to help us shoulder the load, so that it becomes light and less arduous.

But why DOESN'T God simply remove tragedy from our lives? Why doesn't God instantaneously heal us when we have cancer or immediately mend broken relationships? Why do we have to endure pain and difficulty, illness and even persecution? Is it because God is POWERLESS to do so? Or maybe God ENJOYS seeing our tears and hearing our cries? The truth is that God cares for us SO much that God has designed a personal program to develop our spiritual and moral muscles- as we used to say at the gym, "no pain, no gain." God is not finished with us the moment we accept Jesus into our lives as our Lord and Savior. As Paul writes in Philippians, "I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus." In other words, when God forgave you of your sins and entered your heart to clean up your life, that was just the BEGINNING of God's intention for you. As George Matheson believed, man was made by God to become PERFECT THROUGH sufferings, not to be made PERFECTLY FREE FROM sufferings.

God's divine intention for every one of us is that we might eventually be transformed into the image of Jesus, his Son, as that's what a REAL Christian is- a little Christ, one whose life resembles Jesus. However, this process of God transforming us takes an ENTIRE LIFETIME, and trials and tragedy and tribulation become the PRIMARY METHOD by which God shapes our lives.

As our scripture lessons says, "We exult in our tribulations knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope." and again, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials; knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

Now neither I nor scripture means to imply that God ASSIGNS sickness, suffering and ultimately death to each of us. God is not the author of tragedy and tribulation- rather, that is the present state of the world; it is one of the givens of life that people get injured, are unfairly treated, and even die. War, sickness, disease, injustice, famine, death- these are components of living that affect EVERYONE- good and bad alike. There is nothing more cruel or unfair to God than to ascribe such effects to him, to assert that God WANTS or DESIRES us to suffer when the truth is they are inherently constitutive of life itself. In fact, the very first of the four main principles of Buddhism states that life is hard and full of suffering.

However, the promise Christ makes to us is this- if given the chance, God CAN and WILL enter into our predicament and offer us the grace and strength to survive it, to triumph over it and WHAT'S MORE, to even LEARN from it so that we become stronger Christians and thus able to help others in THEIR distress. Without looking to God for help, a tragedy is a meaningless event filled with hopelessness and despair. However, when God is invited to be a part of the problem, he will give us the wisdom and encouragement to rise above those circumstances as stronger and better persons. He fills that tragic event with hope and promise because he is there working with you, not only through his personal presence in you through his Holy Spirit but through his physical presence in the world, that is, through his body, the Church. Thus, we see how God is able to take something painful and disastrous and transform it into a redemptive experience in our lives.

The Bible is very clear what the Christian's response to trials, tragedies and tribulations should be. As Paul says, "We are to exult, we are to rejoice in our tribulations" and as James says, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials." This is one of the great paradoxes of our faith, that rather than despair of life when suffering or misfortune strike, we are to rejoice, to be glad. From a very human reaction, it is counter-intuitive and seems absolutely preposterous. You don't rejoice when you discover a lump in your breast or your spouse dies. These are occasions to worry, to fear, to mourn.

But God instructs us OTHERWISE- he tells us to REJOICE. This was a universal teaching of Christ. Jesus said "Blessed (or happy) are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." "Blessed are you when men shall revile you and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad; for great is your reward in heaven."

In Acts 5, the Apostles were beaten, thrown into jail and threatened with death. This is what we read of them, "And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name."

During Paul's second missionary tour, he was almost lynched at Philippi, then beaten and imprisoned. There in the dark, damp bowels of that prison, the prisoners prayed and sang all night long. There was no circumstance so overwhelming that it could rob him of his peace and his joy.

When the Apostle Paul prays three times that God might remove his infirmity, his thorn in the flesh, he writes to the Corinthian church:

"And He (God) said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distress, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, I am strong."

The same could be said of Peter, the chief disciple, who writes in his first epistle:

"In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

Peter compares faith to gold, and as gold is purified under intense heat, burning away the dross and impurities, our faith is likewise perfected under the intense heat of sufferings and trials.

Of course, as those well-worn words from Ecclesiastes remind us, in life, there is "a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance." However, the scripture record is clear that once that period is over, the Christian's mature response to suffering is to react with joy and with hope. This doesn't mean that we should take positive delight in tribulation- we're not masochists, those weird people who enjoy pain. As one of my professors in college once said in regard to this verse, "God doesn't tell us to say 'hallelujah' because it hurts; we say 'hallelujah' because it HELPS." Neither does scripture say that we are to glory "in spite of" tribulation- in other words, that we are to take a noble, Stoic "grin and bear it" attitude to show others how strong we can be. Rather, Jesus, Peter, Paul, the rest of the disciples, George Matheson- ALL ARE SAYING THE VERY SAME THING, that we are to rejoice and give glory to God because we know we are NEVER WITHOUT God's help, and where the rest of the world may think we are in the grip of a seemingly hopeless tragedy, we see that SAME experience through the eyes of Christian faith. It teaches us how in spite of trying circumstances, there is one present who gives us the strength of heart and mind to bear up under it, to learn and even GROW from it, no matter how hard or tragic they may be. As I think about the many Christians I have known, the most beautiful saints have been those who have endured much, those who had shouldered great burdens throughout their lives. It taught them about their own weakness and insufficiency and thus increased their reliance and dependence upon God. It's always easier to trust God when things are going well, but what about when fortunes reverse themselves- is your commitment just as steadfast?

But sufferings not only show us how weak our own faith is and drives us to Christ for his help, it also enlarges our sympathies and binds us to the rest of the world in THEIR sufferings. It requires adversity to understand adversity. Some of the great social reformers, like Charles Dickens, struggled themselves in deep poverty when they were young. They had made the vow

that they would fight it the rest of their lives so that others might be spared what they had to endure. In Jesus Christ, we have a friend who understands our plight and MORE, who experienced the height and depth of every sort of suffering on his way to that cross- even DEATH. But Jesus triumphed over it and he promises that with his help and strength, we can triumph over it TOO.

I want to end my message with a quote from a great Christian saint, Madame Guyon, whose life has inspired millions over the world:

"God will give us opportunities to try our consecration, whether it be a true one or not. No man can be wholly the Lord's unless he is wholly consecrated to the Lord; and no man can know whether he is thus wholly consecrated, except by tribulation. That is the test. To rejoice in God's will, when that will impart nothing but happiness, is easy even for the natural man. But none but the renovated man, none but the religious man, can rejoice in the Divine will, when it crosses his path, disappoints his expectations, and overwhelms him with sorrow. Trial, therefore, instead of being shunned, should be welcomed as the test- and the true test- of a true state.

Beloved souls, there are consolations which pass away; but you will not find true and abiding consolation except in entire abandonment, and in that love which loves the cross. He who does not welcome the cross does not welcome God."

Friends, the person who spends his or her time, energy and resources always trying to avoid trials and suffering is fighting a losing cause. The most immature and superficial Christians are those who FLEE such battles. As Peter says, our faith is like fine gold- it must be refined and purified under the heat of trying circumstances. Trials will help us to understand our weakness. Moreover, trials will cause us to cling more ardently to Christ. And just as important, trials will enlarge our hearts and unite us with others in THEIR suffering. Trials can thus become God's personal program for us to develop our moral and spiritual powers. This morning, are you afflicted, cast down, stressed out, facing difficult times, then don't despair. Instead, LOOK TO CHRIST, SEEK HIS STRENGTH, HOLD FAST TO HIS WORD, and YOU TOO will grow in his grace- HE PROMISES US that. Amen and amen.