

St. James Lutheran Church

Holy Trinity

May 30, 2010

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First Reading: Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

Second Reading: Romans 5:1-5

Gospel: John 16:12-15

Goodness That Endures

This world never lacks for troubles. Crude oil continues to gush into the Gulf of Mexico – an environmental catastrophe on a frightening scale. On this Memorial Day weekend, soldiers and civilians continue to die in Iran and Afghanistan, in wars that have no end in sight. Hundreds of thousands are still homeless in Haiti in the aftermath of a devastating earthquake. The global economy is still on a shaky footing, still coping with the fallout of a major recession. The State of Illinois is billions of dollars in debt – unable to meet obligations to social service agencies and universities. Of course we have personal struggles as well: illness, grief, unemployment, stress, disappointment. Despite any outward appearances, nobody lives a life totally free of burdens and pain.

In order that troubles do not overwhelm us – and our disappointments devolve into despair – we need to remember the good news. And today, St. Paul is the man with an encouraging word. In the opening verses of Romans 5, Paul reminds us that amid all the things going wrong in our world and in our lives, there are some things that are both very right and very good. Can you stand some good news?

For starters, “we are justified by faith.” - not might be / could be / will be – we are justified. That is, we are right with God. The burden of sin and guilt is lifted from us. We have been transformed from enemies of God into friends of God. We have been declared “not guilty,” “fully pardoned.” There is no long “to do list”, no make up work, no hoops to jump through for any

of us. We are not obliged to find excuses for our shortcomings, or to rationalize our mistakes, or to somehow justify our existence. There is nothing that you and I have to do or accomplish to be deemed worthy of being loved by God.

The wonderful news is that we are loved by God – right now. And his love covers a multitude of sins. God has shown his love for us, emphatically and unequivocally, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our faith in Jesus, our trust in his love and forgiveness, opens our lives to this blessing of justification. What a relief to realize we are blessed not because of who we are – but because of who God is. And there's more . . .

"We have peace with God." People will often say, "I just want to be happy." This longing for happiness is quite natural. No one has to teach you to like ice cream, or compel you to enjoy a beautiful summer day. Yet we know happiness can be fleeting – because happiness depends on pleasant circumstances (money for ice cream, good weather). Peace isn't quite like happiness. Peace may not be as exciting as happiness – yet what peace lacks in ecstasy it more than makes up for by its endurance. Peace abides through all the peaks and valleys, all the triumphs and tragedies that come our way. Happiness can be fickle – peace is constant. Ultimately, is not peace what our spirits crave? God gives us a peace this world cannot give – a peace that is ours to enjoy, and also a peace we can share (as we do here at worship).

Furthermore, we stand in the grace of God. Grace is our solid foundation. What we could never expect to earn or deserve is God's free and gracious gift: life itself, and all that makes life worth living. None of us made the sun come up this morning, or kept our hearts beating while we slept, or caused a single flower to bloom. Grace is the sheer giftedness – not only of salvation – but of life itself. This is the truth that sets us free – free from guilt and fear, yes – and also free from the need to impress anyone or prove our worth. We're free, instead, to enjoy the goodness of creation, to love others as we are loved, to be a blessing.

And, we have hope. Where would we be without it? We hope for many things in the near term: to get home safely, to get over an illness, to get a job or a promotion. Yet the great hope we have in common, the hope that sustains us over the long term, is the hope Paul speaks of as “our hope of sharing the glory of God.” What exactly is that all about?

Certainly the hope of sharing the glory of God is an anticipation of being at home in heaven forever with God. This is the resurrection promise of ultimate victory over sin and pain and death. It is this hope that upholds us in times of suffering and grief. This hope was like life-giving water to me during my mother’s decline and death. At the same time, our hope is not only for the life to come. Way back in the second century, Irenaeus observed: “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.” The hope that invigorates us is this hope of being fully alive – as alive as Jesus was here on earth: vibrant in body, mind and spirit – alive to the goodness of God around us and within us. We don’t have to wait until we die to share the glory of God.

What makes our Christian faith credible to me is the way it blends the joyful promise of the Gospel with a consistent realism. Christianity is not merely a religion of optimism and positive thinking. Consistent with what we find in the Bible, Christians are honest about the realities of suffering and sin and death. Faith is not an invitation to pretend that I’m OK, you’re OK, everything’s OK. Yet faith is that assurance, that confidence, that because God is good, suffering does not have the final word – or the power to quench God’s spirit in our lives.

Instead, as Paul tells it, suffering produces endurance. It’s been said, “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” That’s not exactly Paul’s point, but he does assure us that running the race, persevering, builds stamina. Seeing our suffering in light of what Christ suffered gives reason to carry on. Paul continues: “endurance produces character.” I appreciate a phrase Pastor Eugene Peterson uses to describe the life of discipleship: “a long obedience in the same direction.” Christian character is formed and deepened over the long haul.

Paul concludes: "and character produces hope." Elsewhere, Paul describes hope as a spiritual gift, bestowed by God. Yet here he reminds us that hope also has the quality of a virtue – a human capacity that's developed over time. It's as though you and I need to learn to make room in our lives for the blessing of hope. Hope is an essential quality of mature, Christian character.

And, as Paul emphasizes: this "hope does not disappoint us." All our human wishes and dreams don't come true, but our hope in Christ is not like that. We aren't being set up for a big let-down! Christ is already risen! He has overcome the world and its injustice, corruption and contradiction. You and I have already received the Holy Spirit, the Spirit Paul once described as God's down payment on all his promises. "God's love has been poured into our hearts" – this is not a possibility, but a reality. You and I have been given the greatest of gifts: faith, hope and love – blessings that will endure when everything else turns to dust. This trio of blessings is brought to us by the God who is so great he comes to us in Three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the living Holy Trinity.

On this Trinity Sunday, I remind you that the Trinity is not an abstract doctrine to be explained – it is a holy mystery to be embraced and celebrated. The wondrous mystery is that this great and glorious God loves us – and is determined to have us as his own.

Therefore, let us be at peace

be hopeful

be joyful

be grateful.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

Amen.