

EASTER 6

Romans 3:25-30, 5:1-11

In his second letter to the Corinthians, which preceded Paul's letter to the Romans, he had to argue that his hardships, far from being an indication of failure, were in fact what one might expect of a life lived in unity with Christ. Christ suffered from opposition. Paul suffered from opposition. In the Corinthian letter, Paul is dealing with believers who stood under the influence of a spirituality which highlighted success and impressiveness, and called Paul's status and authority into question because he did not measure up to their expectations. This upset Paul. The common belief in these communities was that wealth, status and power were a true sign of God's blessing, and Paul showed no evidence of these.

The Corinthian letters are some of Paul's most personal writings. Against this assault, he has to argue that what counts is not impressiveness, wealth and power, but one's compatibility with Christ's ministry, God's grace made evident in Christ.

Echoes of these very same attacks are heard in the Romans letter. Now, in a calmer setting, Paul reiterates that the life lived in solidarity with Christ will often imitate the life Christ lived, including hardship. The difficulties and defeats, rather than driving one into shame, will give followers something to be proud of. After all, this life that we choose, is about being in solidarity with the way of Christ.

Rather than be ashamed of hardship, as was prevalent in the Mediterranean culture, Paul asserts the opposite. He began the substance of his address to the Romans which we heard last week, with the claim: "I am not ashamed." Not only is he not ashamed, but he actually sees value in hardship. Surrounding the mention of hardship is the word, "hope" for Paul: *"....and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And this hope will not lead to disappointment."* A positive attitude informs Paul's self-understanding. Whatever the circumstances he looks to the future without despair - even in the worst crises. That hope is founded not in promises of things or a place, but in the person of God.

Being set right with God or being justified, brings us peace with God. *"Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us."* When we have a right relationship with God, we have a right relationship with ourselves, and a right relationship with others. When these relationships are not right, we become troubled, stressed, and at worst alienated - from God, from ourselves and from others.

Nothing should clutter the simplicity of our relationship with God. There are no hidden hurdles we must jump or qualifications we need to achieve. God through Christ has offered all unconditional love. And when someone offers us that kind of relationship, it can be threatening, because the invitation is to be loved for who we are, not for who we are

trying to be or for the image we are trying to present or hide behind.

Trusting ourselves enough to let ourselves be loved is choosing to be vulnerable, choosing to take risks despite having lived through many bad past experiences. It can be hard to allow ourselves to be loved, and Paul has been demolishing every claim that would add any sort of condition for that love to flow. Nothing is required other than faith or trust and the simple acceptance of the love offered.

According to Paul, this relationship of trust and love brings peace. But, if we were dependent on a constant renegotiation of this relationship, constantly changing conditions in order to be loved by God, we would never know peace. The peace would end up being our own achievement. Not so for Paul. The ground of the peace of which he speaks is access. Paul said: *“Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God’s glory.”* Access to God means access to God's full and generous grace and compassion, a grace and compassion which address our true self - a grace that is forgiving and comforting, encouraging and challenging.

There are times when we might find ourselves rejecting such grace and falling back on our old approaches to establish our self worth. It is at times possible to hate love, to reject it, even to kill it, because it addresses us as we really are.

To have access to authority is useful. Once, in Chicago, the mayor and the city council were at an impasse. The city was suffering from lack of services. So the president of the Chicago Church Federation, the Roman Catholic archbishop, and a rabbi met with the mayor and the chief obstructionist in the city council. By conferring with the city officials the clergy were able to develop agreements that put the city back to work.

The clergy had access to those in authority. In the business world, a person on a job search will look for those who can give the job seeker access to the powers that be. In the home, children learn very quickly how to find access to the parent or parents who will give them help or what they need. What is so notable about the access Paul says we have to God is that this is access to grace – the grace in which we already stand. We do not have to fear that the authority may be neutral or hostile toward us. We have access to grace which is already expressed in love for us. We stand in grace. We already have favour in God's sight. We begin with God on our side.

Paul wrote for a world in which people were desperately trying to find the passwords that would give them access to God. We are familiar with access codes, logins and passwords. A finger or memory slip when typing in a password, can result in the sad judgement: "Access denied." Some of Paul's readers thought the password or the key needed to access God, would be careful obedience to the law of Moses. Others thought that civic virtue was the key. Still others tried to appease God by

the breadth of their philosophical knowledge.

Paul's astonishing claim is that there is only one password we need to remember: Jesus Christ, and that in Jesus Christ everyone has access to **grace**. And suddenly the entire picture is reversed. It is not that we are striving to reach God, it is that God is striving to reach us ~ that is grace. It is not that we use Jesus to attain God's mercy, it is that God sends Jesus to enact the mercy that God has intended from the beginning of time.

Grace, however, is not only the activity of God in Jesus Christ that reaches out to include everyone (in Paul's case, both Jews and Gentiles.) Grace is also our dwelling place "this grace in which we stand." God's goodness to us surrounds us and upholds us and defines who we are. Our lives are shaped by this amazing gift we can never achieve, but can only freely receive.

This life grounded in grace is not marked by earthly success and most certainly not blessed by earthly prosperity. Far more often it is marked by suffering. It is after all, a Christ-shaped life that lives in grace. But the suffering bears its own fruits, or better, grace bears fruit through the suffering. The litany of the gifts of grace is a kind of sketch of moral and spiritual development for the person grounded in the grace of God. Start with suffering and move to endurance; from endurance comes character, and character produces hope. Ethicists are committed to helping us think

about "character" ethics. Paul would say that we can be pretty sure that we have acquired the right character if we live in hope.

The source and the means of this hope is love. Love produces hope. We all know that this is true existentially. The child who lives in hope is a child who has been surrounded by love. However, the opposite of love is not hate, it is fear, and where there is fear, there is no hope because hope is the product of love. For Paul, the three great gifts of God's spirit are: faith, hope, and love. In Romans, the three gifts are inseparable from one another and inseparable from God's spirit.

It becomes clear that what counts is not so much our access to God as God's access to us. It is not that we reach longingly toward heaven, but that heaven reaches out longingly to us. It is not that we are good enough or wise enough or obedient enough to gain God; it is that God has gained us for Godself.

Paul's spirituality stands and falls by this understanding of God's love and compassion. It is the basis of his present confidence and his hope for the future. For Paul, one's sense of self is closely connected to one's relationship with God, as well as one's relationship with self and with others.

The common thread throughout the letter is love and grace. For Paul, peace and hope are not simply founded in a past event, as he highlights

the cross and resurrection of Jesus as something into which we enter in solidarity. They are also founded on something which is ongoing: the love which comes from God and enters into us, through God's intimate presence with us, the Spirit. That love keeps on flowing into us and out through us into the world, love is a fruit of the Spirit.

So, for Paul, peace is about being in a right relationship with God, not as some distant judge nor as someone who is trying to draw us up into himself, but as one who is expansively living love out into the universe. We will have peace as we ride the flow of God's compassion out into the universe in our world and context. This is not a matter of following carefully defined 'oughts', ancient or modern, but of being inwardly connected in such a way that we have an orientation which unites our joy, our intentions and attitudes and our actions. The more we allow ourselves to be loved, the more we are free to ride this flow of love.

For Paul, love is the essential message of the gospel. This is love not just for one's friends, but for people who have been written off as of no value, people who might be seen to justify God's stern anger: "*When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good.*" Paul sees God displaying this love in Christ. It is there for all. The love to which Paul points, as he has already made clear, is not simply human love. It is God's love shown in Jesus Christ.

But all that is the preface to the main point: that Christ has died – not for the righteous and not for the good, but for the ungodly. That is good news because most of us know perfectly well that the category of the ungodly includes us. Paul is outflanking his opponents by focusing on God's being. We cease to be enemies of God because of who God is: *“For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God.”*

God's goodness is marked not by absence of wrongdoing in some kind of sterile purity, but by the fact that God keeps on loving, keeps on confronting Israel with that love, and reaches out even to sinners and Gentiles. It is a goodness marked by generosity and truth, calling for us to let ourselves be seen as we are and be forgiven, affirmed, and engaged in that same dynamic goodness through the Spirit.

Hope, an encounter that captivates our imagination so we can't help but become more than who we thought we were, and find ourselves living for something that is at the same time both preposterous and impossible. The recipe for hope, says Paul, is this: suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. And hope does not disappoint us. But, what happens when suffering plus

endurance plus character don't produce hope? What happens when they produce despair?

Maybe Paul missed something. I can suffer and still have hope. But despair? The truth is, we can't truly understand what "life" is, what Easter is, until we know darkness. And not just "my flight got cancelled," or "I didn't make the team," kind of darkness. But the part where there is no life. Where death creeps in. Yet, sitting on the edge of darkness is hope. A tweeted prayer quoted Bruce Cockburn specifically about this: *"For those who kick at the darkness 'til it bleeds daylight, we pray to the Lord."*

The only way around despair is through it. It's the time spent in the deep, dark, cold cave that truly prepares us for the gasp of life that fills our lungs, energizes the soul, and gives us the hope that does not disappoint. But there has to be a period of despair, of suffering, and intentional "spiritual waiting" before something new emerges.

We struggle to come up with a doctrine of the atonement, and all the classical solutions seem fall short. Paul was blessed by a richly unsystematic mind. His language about what Jesus does shifts from verb to verb: Christ saves; Christ justifies; Christ reconciles. His description of what Christ does shifts from metaphor to metaphor: an obedient second Adam undoes the disobedience of the first. A sinless

man is made to die for sin. A godly Messiah dies for ungodly people.

The claim outreaches all our metaphors. The name embraces all our weaknesses: Jesus Christ, access to God's grace; where we stand. Christ made it all real. Through his life, suffering and death we gained access to the grace of God, and we gained the sure hope of sharing the glory of God.

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE EASTER 6 - MAY 14, 2023

THE PRAYERS (*Each petition of the prayers concludes with:*)

Living and loving God ... **Receive our prayers.**

Loving God, you who are both Mother and father to us, in this time of prayer we thank you for your love. We thank you for Jesus who taught us of your all-encompassing parents' love; the love that waits with anxiety for us to return home; the love that also runs down the road to gather us in your arms; the love that searches until we are found; that loved us so much you sent us Jesus.

We thank you that we are your children, called by name, called even before we were formed in our mother's womb, called into your world-wide family, where there is such diversity, such individuality, such creativity, such beauty.

Living and loving God ... **Receive our prayers.**

We ask that rejoicing in the diversity of humankind, we might always love as Jesus loved us; that we might always appreciate others of different faith traditions and cultures, asking pardon for the times when we have failed you in love.

Living and loving God ... **Receive our prayers.**

Emergency messages on phones, emergency responders knocking on doors have sent over 24,500 souls fleeing the uncontrolled wildfires in the boreal regions in the province of Alberta. We pray for them as the state of emergency unfolds. Rapid snowmelt has laid bare dry grasses that fuel spring wildfires. Hotter, drier, earlier, longer, bigger wildfires are in store in the many places around the world – we pray for the peoples in these regions. Sustain the fighters, responders, trackers and the many places where people are received. Shelter them in community.

Living and loving God ... **Receive our prayers.**

O Lord, there are so many severe issues and “open secrets.” We call out for justice as we hear that one in ten children around the world are subjected to or forced into labor, otherwise known as labour

trafficking.

Living and loving God ... **Receive our prayers.**

The food and things we buy come through U.S. slaughter houses, cookie factories, cereal-packaging companies, auto parts factories, palm tree plantations, where known corporations and sub-manufacturing entities are using migrant children. Help us to see these young faces walking out from a parking lot at shift change. Open our eyes, our minds and our hearts. Children are being forced to pay rent, are being dropped by their “sponsors”, or are being held in a vicious debt bondage, working in the evenings and at night, falling asleep in school.

Living and loving God ... **Receive our prayers.**

We give you thanks for our own families, remembering especially our own mothers or those who stood in her place who took care of us, who met our needs, not only nurturing our bodies, but also providing us love and security. For the love of those who are still with us and for the love that is in your nearer presence we give you thanks.

Living and loving God ... **Receive our prayers.**

And knowing the imperfect nature of humankind, where there may be a need of forgiveness that you would forgive and help us to forgive.

Living and loving God ... **Receive our prayers.**

For mothers at the start of the adventure of motherhood that you will give them all they need.

Living and loving God ... **Receive our prayers.**

For mothers who are stretched in patience and love, who find things hard, with too much to do and not enough time to it, with babies who don't sleep, or caring for children with special gifts, running out of energy and patience.

Living and loving God ... **Receive our prayers.**

For mothers whose children do not have clean water, or enough food to eat, or proper medication.

Living and loving God ... **Receive our prayers.**

For mothers experiencing a miscarriage, or babies stillborn, or those unable to have children, that their motherly natures would be used in nurturing others.

Living and loving God ... **Receive our prayers.**

May God bless all women on this special day; in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, One God, the Mother of us all.

Amen.

Joined into one by the Holy Spirit, let us pray as Jesus taught.

Our Father ...