



Sunday, Sept. 27, 2020
*Sermon Series: Searching for Hope During
Turbulent Times*

Growing Through Hardship
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Romans 5:1-5 NRSV

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

How many of you are experiencing hardship these days? My hunch would be most all of you – me too – in one form or another. Because of COVID, some of us are struggling to pay the bills. Our work life has been upended. Zoom meetings are relentless. Households have had to be rearranged. School schedules disrupted, young adults moving back home, older adults needing a place to live. Beyond that, there's the social isolation many of us are feeling. In senior living facilities, residents are mostly required to stay to themselves. We have to think twice before heading out the door. We need to wear a mask. We don't get to see family and friends in the ways we did before.

Add up all these things, and more, and anxiety and depression are on the rise. For many of us, it feels like we have never gone through anything like this before. And it's hard, sometimes intolerably hard. We're worried: How long will this go on? How are we supposed to find the way forward? A vaccine may be coming, but we don't know when it will come for us, and how effective it will be. Perhaps the sheer uncertainty of COVID is one of the hardest things of all.

Hardship didn't start with COVID, of course. Some of you lived through the dust bowl days of the Great Depression. Maybe you lost a farm. Some of you endured the sacrifices of World War II. Maybe a family member was killed in the war. And undoubtedly many of have faced personal struggles too: Alzheimer's, cancer, the death of a loved one.

Joe Kasper is a physician who's devoted much of his career to treating patients with life-threatening illness. Still, when his teenage son Ryan was diagnosed with a rare and fatal form of epilepsy, Joe Kasper felt completely at a loss. He writes: "In a few short moments, I learned my son's fate and there was nothing I could do about it—no hope for a cure." As he describes it: "It was like seeing my son tied to a railroad track, with a locomotive right around the bend and having to look on in helpless frustration and despair."

Trauma can feel like a seismic event. It can shake our belief in a just world. It can rob us of the sense that life is controllable, predictable, and meaningful. If the trauma is bad enough, and goes on long enough, it can even shake our belief in a loving God and can cause us to question if God cares one wit about our world.

As I see it, what happens to us in the midst of hardship might be almost as significant as the hardship itself. The Apostle Paul is a case in point. Paul explores some of what happened to him in his letter to the Romans. You've maybe heard his story. Paul's life got turned upside down while he was on the road to Damascus. He was breathing fire, tracking down and arresting early followers of Jesus. He despised them and wanted them gone!

One day Paul got blinded by a bright light and was literally knocked off his horse. He heard a voice from heaven, "Saul, Saul [which was Paul's Jewish name], why are you persecuting me?" Before the day was over, Paul got introduced to Jesus. After a time of deep soul-searching, and some help from friends, Paul heard the voice from heaven again, "I want you to come and work for me!" Believe it or not, he said yes. The next thing he knew, Paul the persecutor had become Paul the preacher.

This story might not seem like hardship, but it was. Like a lot of traumatic events, it led to some radical rethinking and rearranging of Paul's life. He literally lost his religion. He'd always been a believer in God, but now he was seeing his God most clearly in Jesus. We hear some of Paul's newfound faith in Romans 5: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith - in other words, since we have been made right with God - then we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

In much of the rest of Romans, Paul explains how connecting with Christ and his suffering can change a life. At times, Paul gets very personal about our hardships: "We *boast* in our sufferings," he says. Of course, we wouldn't want to take this claim out of context. Paul isn't beating himself up in a sort of false modesty. *I've suffered more than anyone!* Nor is Paul discounting the real and painful ache of suffering. Rather he's claiming that our hardship can be used by God for larger purposes. He writes: "We boast in our suffering...for we know that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope."

Let's be honest, it can be hard to see anything but the suffering when we're in the thick of it. Perspective often comes only in hindsight. Paul isn't suggesting a linear process. And he's not claiming that God regularly sends troubles our way so we can become better people. Rather, Paul is painting a picture like this: "Hardship comes. When it does, it can feel like we've been knocked off our horse. Indeed, it can feel like our future has been ripped away, that there is no hope! The question is: Can we

see step back for just a moment and see a bigger picture? Can we find the strength and resolve to hang in there? Hopefully we can, Paul claims, especially with the help and healing power of Christ. Paul gives us perspective: “We trust that suffering can produce endurance, which can produce character, which can produce hope.” And who knows, we might even become different persons in the process. And here’s why: “because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

What do you think: Could this happen to you and me – God producing endurance, character, and hope. I’d like to think so. Two psychologists at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte, Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, were doing a study on grieving parents. Joe Kasper, after his son’s diagnosis of epilepsy, connected with them. As you might imagine, Tedeschi and Calhoun met any number of parents who were suffering greatly. But that’s not all they found. They found glimmers of hope too. Thus, they decided to expand their research.

They went on to study hundreds of people who had endured all sorts of trauma: victims of sexual assault, prisoners of war, those enduring life-threatening illnesses. Up to this point, the researchers had confirmed two likely outcomes of trauma: One group developed PTSD and faced debilitating anxiety and depression. In contrast, those in the second group were resilient. After a time and a season, they bounced back to their original state before the trauma.

What surprised Tedeschi and Calhoun, though, was a third category. Almost half the people they studied reported at least one positive change. It sounded almost *catchphrasey*, but they came to refer to it as post-traumatic growth. Wounded people, having suffered all sorts of maladies, were suddenly searching for meaning, summoning inner strength, and somehow finding the way forward – one step at a time.

I wonder what the researchers would have found in the Apostle Paul: “We boast in our suffering, because suffering can produce endurance, and endurance can produce character, and character can produce hope.” Does that sound almost too good to be true? Maybe. Can the process be measured? Not exactly. Does it come in a neat and tidy formula? Almost never. But again, who’s to say what God can do with hardship when God’s love and transforming power get poured into a life?

So how can growth happen? Here’s one way. Etty Hillesum was a Dutch author who wrote about the German occupation of Amsterdam. Hillesum happened to be Jewish. She ended up in Auschwitz and eventually died there. Over the months she spend lots of time reflecting on what she referred to as “the Divine Center” inside of us. She wrote a prayer: “There is a really deep well inside me. And in it dwells God. Sometimes I am there too.... And that is all we can manage these days and also all that really matters, that we safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves.”

I find Hillesum’s prayer powerful...and convicting. It gives me pause: In the midst of the noise and clamor of 2020, can we find the Divine Center inside of us? COVID continues to wreak suffering and disorder with no end in sight. More and more people are facing the catastrophe of extreme weather. Our highly partisan political

battles split us further and further apart. To top it off, the neurotic news cycle gives us breaking news every hour on the hour.

So, do you have any peace these days? Are you feeling secure? Does God care one wit about you, and me, and our world.? The Great Depression, World War II, the Holocaust – maybe the hardships we’re facing are nothing new, but they are new to us. And like Paul on the road to Damascus, they threaten to turn our world upside down.

Is there any hope for us? This past week I read a devotion by Richard Rohr. Rohr said that our vocation, as followers of Jesus, must be to first restore the Divine Center by fully occupying it ourselves. As Etty Hillesum prayed: “All we can manage these days, and all that really matters, is that we safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves.”

This might not seem like much for busy, proactive followers of Jesus who are used to getting things done, but it’s a crucially important place to return again and again.. And perhaps it can become our bedrock. Rohr challenges us: “What other power do we have now? Everything else is tearing us apart. No matter when we get a vaccine, or who wins the election, or who gets nominated to the Supreme Court, we cannot abide in such a place for any length of time or it will become our prison.”

Rohr goes even further: “God cannot abide with us in a place of fear. God cannot abide with us in a place of ill-will or hatred. God cannot abide with us inside a nonstop volley of claims and counterclaims. God cannot speak inside of so much noise and conscious deceit. God cannot be born except in a womb of Love. So” concludes Rohr, “offer God that womb.”

Is there any hope for us in the midst of our hardships? Is there any chance of growth? Paul seemed to think so, and he hitched his life to the God we meet in Jesus. Joe Kasper seemed to think so, and he founded an organization called Co-Destiny to help parents honor their children who had died. Etty Hillesum seemed to think so, and even though she didn’t survive the Holocaust, her writings continue to call us to seek out the Divine Center.

Friends, I have a couple of suggestions for you today: First, over the next two months, limit the amount of news you consume – whether on TV, your I-phone, or social media. How about 30-60 a day? The news is tearing us apart. Instead, use extra time to seek out the Divine Center.

A second suggestion: Build a bridge or two of understanding and peace. Ask questions and then wait for the answer. Listen more than you speak. Reach out with compassion. Share the hope of Jesus. Somebody out there can use what you have to offer: make a phone call and check in; sign up for a volunteer opportunity; donate food to those who are hungry; send someone an email or a text or a note and let them know you’re thinking of them.

As you do these things, keep this in mind: we boast in our suffering, trusting that suffering can lead to endurance, which can lead to character, which can lead to hope.

We might not like our suffering – and we’re not meant to – but our lives are meant to be lived with purpose. Hardship can be one of the keys to making this happen.

As we go through times of suffering and struggle, God’s love can change us. We might even experience post-traumatic change and growth. And then, not only will our lives have purpose, but our suffering will too. And maybe, just maybe, God will make of it something good. Amen.