

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
Romans 5:1-11 *My Hope Is Built . . .*

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“*We also boast in our sufferings . . .*” The idea that we would boast in our sufferings has always seemed so ridiculous to me. After all, I tend to go to great lengths to avoid suffering. It’s not something I seek out. Shoot, at the first sign of pain, I pop three Advil and hope for the best. Indeed, not only do I avoid suffering but, when I am suffering, I don’t boast about it. Rather, I’ll do nearly anything in my power to end the suffering, not prolong it for the sake of increasing my credibility and resumé in the field of suffering so that I’ll be able to qualify as the most boisterous of all the sufferers suffering ever.

If I’m going to boast, it’s not going to be about suffering. If I’m going to boast, I’m going to boast about Ginny, the finest corgi in all the land. Or, Jesse, the most handsome chiropractor in all of Suttons Bay. Or, Nathan, about whom I have so many things that I would like to boast but he would really get upset with me if I did. Indeed, when it comes to boasting, if I’m going to do it, I’m going to boast about good things. I’m certainly not going to go around boasting about migraines, anxiety disorders, or the angst I feel and hold on to for DAYS when I say or do something unkind to someone else.

And yet, this morning we’re confronted with these words about boasting in our suffering that the Apostle Paul wrote to early believers in Christ in Rome. *We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 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.*

The Christians in Rome to whom Paul wrote this letter were new Christians. They did not have years of Sunday School during which they had built up a faith to support them during difficult times. They didn’t know the song “Jesus Loves Me, This I Know” to sing to themselves when things got tough. They may not have even known that Jesus said, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.” (Matthew 16:24) The idea that someone would suffer because they followed a religious leader was likely counterintuitive to the folks in Rome, indeed throughout that area of the ancient world, people who had, for generations, believed that suffering was punishment from God, not an inevitable part of serving God.

Indeed, early Christians in Rome would not have had Bible studies in which they learned the nature of discipleship because the small house churches in Rome, established in the mid-first century, began before any of the Gospels were even written down and circulated. The Roman believers didn’t have Bibles, a lectionary, devotional guides, sermons streaming live on Facebook, or experienced teachers to guide them. At this point all of the believers in Rome, even those who had grown up Jewish and so did have some faith education, they were all relying on the accounts of other people to learn about and build up their faith. They believed the Good News of Jesus Christ because people who had experienced it told them about it and showed them Christ’s love.

The early Roman believers would have needed these reminders and reassurances about suffering from Paul, not only because, as I mentioned, they had likely believed for years that suffering was punishment from God and they sort of needed reprogramming on that topic, if you will, but also because they endured great suffering on account of their faith.

The emperor Claudius didn’t like that the people in these so-called churches believed that their freedom and salvation came not from the emperor and his ability to determine the future of his subjects, but rather that the freedom and salvation of the people in the churches came from Christ and Christ alone. Therefore, while their bodies may be vulnerable to the empire, their souls belonged to the Lord. Emperors—then and now (though we now call such people dictators and oligarchs)—emperors rely on their corrupt use of power to fear monger and control people, manipulating them into subservience. Imagine Claudius’ frustration that this group of people held Christ as their ultimate power and authority, not him. And so, in true dictator fashion, Claudius sought to silence those who did not treat him with the respect he thought he deserved through banishment, punishment, and sometimes even death.

Paul understands that it is hard for Christians in Rome. He writes to them to fortify them with the Good News that their suffering at the hands of the empire is not for naught. Surely, at this point in his ministry, he knows the toll that following Christ takes. He had been beaten to within an inch of his life, persecuted, ostracized, and imprisoned many times. Over the course of his ministry Paul spent nearly six years in jail. The last two years of

his life were spent in a Roman prison and he was executed because he refused to renounce Jesus as his lord and savior.

And so it was that Paul was a man well-acquainted with suffering. But, he boasts about it because he knows that Jesus was well-acquainted with suffering, too. Paul needs his listeners, and us, to know that suffering is not an absence of God in our lives. Suffering is not punishment for wrong doing or wrong belief. Rather, suffering is one, inevitable, and two, sometimes evidence that we are living into the plan God has for our lives, just like Jesus did. But, the suffering is not for the sake of suffering in and of itself. The suffering builds endurance which produces character which produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us. (Whereas empires, emperors, and the trappings of security of this world always and eventually do. After all, ain't nobody gonna get saved by having one hundred fifty-seven rolls of toilet paper hoarded in their garage.)

I appreciate the words of New Testament professor Sarah Henrich that summarize the concept I understand Paul wishes for us to grasp.

Even our troubles, rightly lived through, lead us around again to hope. Hope itself . . . is founded on God's gift of love already poured into us by the presence of God, Holy Spirit, in and among us. Our hope will NOT shame us, disappoint us, show us to be fools. Instead, difficulties or not, we live trusting in God's love, God's outreach, God's determination to have us at great cost, now and in the future. How then do we live joyfully confident of reconciliation now and in the future? <sup>1</sup>

And I suppose that question is a question for all time, but especially this time. How do we find joy and reconciliation in such a time as this, a time in which we can find plenty of suffering we could boast about for days. Before the COVID-19 pandemic there was plenty of suffering to be had. But now, well now, now in the midst of the suffering and unknowing and anxiety and division, and being physically separated from so much of what brings us joy, now more than ever we need to know that our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus Christ, our righteousness. Our righteousness is not based on our own abilities and talents. Our righteousness, our being saved through the love of Christ, is about Christ and that is why our hope is in him.

As followers of Christ our hope is not built on the empire, not built on the stock market, not built on our own abilities, not built on election results . . . our hope comes from Christ. And, I don't know about you, but for me it has been true that suffering can lead to hope. While I hate suffering, it has built up my endurance and my endurance has led to more perseverance because I know, I know, in the deepest parts of my being, I know that it was God who brought me through those times of suffering. It was God who saved me . . . over and over and over again. In hindsight, rarely in the moment, but in hindsight I understand that my suffering was building me up to face future challenges and, more importantly, breaking my heart open so that I would be more compassionate towards others.

And that, my friends, is perhaps the greatest thing suffering has to offer—if we are willing to learn from it. For some, suffering leads to bitterness. But for those whose hope is in Christ, suffering can lead to deep compassion and empathy for others who are suffering.

And that's Good News because compassion is what we need a whole lot of in our world right now—compassion for those who suffer—whether that suffering be from being physically sick, mentally ill, emotionally drained, financially unstable, food insecure, or one of the myriad other forms of suffering people all around us are enduring.

And really, this gift of compassion is what we have to bring to such a time as this. Our response, both as a church and as individuals, to this whole COVID-19 situation, this is our opportunity to be reminded that Jesus Christ is the one in whom our hope rests and this is our opportunity to truly follow him by showing compassion and empathy to the least among us. This is our moment to be to our community what Paul was to the church in Rome—beacons of hope in the midst of suffering.

As our high school Sunday School teacher, Rachel North, texted to the youth earlier this week . . . “Guys, no gatherings this week. I need you strong, healthy folks to pitch in where you see an opportunity to help—don't wait to be asked. Big kids take care of little kids. Young people take care of old people. Hold a door, drop off

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=32](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=32)

some groceries, clear an icy walk, babysit. Look around your small circle and help. [Someday] You will tell your kids about how the community came together during the Coronavirus. What will your story be?" And I wonder, when all is said and done, what will our story be? What will we have said, and what will we have done, to love our neighbors as we love ourselves by bringing hope in the midst of suffering. Please join me to sing The Solid Rock, it is number 526 in the hymnal.