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House of Hope

Romans 5:1-5  
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*Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*

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I need to tell you a joke. Mark insisted I tell you this joke. It's a really bad joke – eye rolling kind of joke. But it just has been one of those weeks. Guns violence, Ukraine, January 6th hearings, Roe vs Wade...it has been a lot. We just need to watch Seinfeld or Cheers reruns or something but since we can't do that here...I have a joke for you. What do John the Baptist and Winnie the Pooh have in common? Incorrect but interesting answers include: they both love honey and neither likes to wear pants. But the correct answer is...they have the same middle name. I warned you – it was bad. Sadly, there are no number of bad jokes or sitcom reruns that can lift the collective or individual morale and so we, as Christians, turn to scripture. Today's lesson is a part of a letter to the church in Rome.

The Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are written to teach the basic story about following the example and lessons of Jesus. Then the Epistles, or the letters, are written with those Gospel's in mind but are written to a specific community. They are written to the church trying to help them understand how to be Christian in their context. It was just as confusing and complicated to live out faith then as it is to live out faith as it is today.

Paul's letter to the Roman's is one he writes before he has ever met them. So rather than addressing specific controversies – Paul is writing to teach them doctrine. The book of Romans is dense, and Paul crams a LOT of doctrine into this one letter. The best thesis statement I can offer you is that big picture Paul is trying to say: we have been given freedom because of Christ's redeeming acts for our sinfulness. Then he talks about what it means to live into that freedom. If we live in the knowledge that God ultimately redeems and saves, then what does it liberate us to do? If we are free because of God's love then how does that impact our lives?

One of the things Paul suggests in chapter five is that freedom in Christ liberates us to remain hopeful. Hopeful even in the face of suffering. Hopeful not because we can fix things necessarily but because we know God ultimately can. We are free to be hopeful because we understand the power of God. Paul writes as a poet in chapter five: *we boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.* The word afflictions in another translation is sufferings, which I prefer. Suffering produces endurance, endurance character, and

character hope – God makes this possible. God makes the connection between suffering and hope possible. Without God – there is no hope. Without God suffering is just suffering. God is the bridge between suffering and hope.

I sent a message to a friend this week who is wading in deep waters. Here is how our exchange went: “I’m sorry you are going through such a hard time. It is just the hardest thing. I know you must be really really low. Please know you are not alone. You will get through this and find higher ground.” He replied, “Really really low is right and then lower still. Mega depression is sinking in and it is hard to just brush my teeth. Super heavy and the weight is too much. I am at the end of my rope.”

Really really low and then lower still. How do you reply to someone who is at the end of their rope? Well, I sent him the words from Paul. Then I sent him some of my own thoughts. And I sent him a poem. This is sort of how I process things: scripture and poetry. I find hope in God and hope in stories. This is the poem I sent to my friend, it is called:

**Blessing When the World is Ending by Jan Richardson**

*Look, the world  
is always ending  
somewhere.  
Somewhere  
the sun has come  
crashing down.  
Somewhere  
it has gone  
completely dark.  
Somewhere  
it has ended  
with the gun,  
the knife,  
the fist.  
Somewhere  
it has ended  
with the slammed door,  
the shattered hope.  
Somewhere  
it has ended  
with the utter quiet  
that follows the news  
from the phone,  
the television,  
the hospital room.  
Somewhere  
it has ended  
with a tenderness*

*that will break  
your heart.  
But, listen,  
this blessing means  
to be anything  
but morose.  
It has not come  
to cause despair.  
It is simply here  
because there is nothing  
a blessing  
is better suited for  
than an ending,  
nothing that cries out more  
for a blessing  
than when a world  
is falling apart.  
This blessing  
will not fix you,  
will not mend you,  
will not give you  
false comfort;  
it will not talk to you  
about one door opening  
when another one closes.  
It will simply sit itself beside you  
among the shards  
and gently turn your face  
toward the direction  
from which the light  
will come,  
gathering itself  
about you  
as the world begins  
again.*

*Jan Richardson*

Turn your faces in the direction of God's light and wait for the world to begin again. We need scripture and friends and music and art and poetry and literature to turn our hearts and minds and souls away from all that feels dark and heavy so we can turn towards the light. This is not so we can be blissfully ignorant about those hard things but it is rather so we can face them. We have been given the freedom to be hopeful in Christ, even when it feels as though the world is ending.

Now, what about those of you who do not have this feeling that the world is ending. For everyone who is at the end of their rope there is another one who is full of optimism and zest for life. People are working summer jobs and graduating to new adventures and getting married and expecting babies and buying houses and getting new jobs and retiring and enjoying God's creation. You are out there, your role in the Christian community is just as important. When the pendulum is swinging up for you it is your job to point others towards the hope. It is then when the one who tells stories of new life, you share songs and poems and scriptures of hope, you show up at the door with food and companionship, you are the one who models hopeful living and reminds others that God is in our midst. You know the Italian hunting dogs, who scout out the rare and valuable truffles for their owners. It's kind of like that...you are on a quest to find and point to hope for others.

My home church in Minnesota is called House of Hope Presbyterian Church. It is a beautiful, large sanctuary with gothic structure with stunning stained glass, and carvings in wood and stone throughout. The ministers preached from a pulpit that seems to appear from out of the sky. I was baptized as a child in their stone font in July of 1981. While my brothers and I were raised in my mother's Catholic tradition, The House of Hope was our occasional church when my Presbyterian grandparents came to town. Ultimately this was the church that I chose to join in college and where I ultimately was ordained as a minister in 2006. When I sat in that beautiful sanctuary, as a child, or a college student, or as an ordained minister home for a visit, I always felt small. In a good way. I felt small because God felt big in that place. My problems, my worries, my contemplations felt like they were welcome in that place. It felt like this place was the right place to be to seek out the truth, and search for wisdom, and find hope.

This is what the church should be for us – a house of hope. A place to come and feel appropriately small recognizing the majesty and power of God. A place where we are reminded of the hope in God's word and where we witness hope in the lives of the people around us. God so loved the world that God gave his only Son...to redeem and save creation – to take a fallen and sinful world and give it another shot – to renew hope to those who have fallen 'really really low and then still lower.'

Paul's poetry has one key word – *suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love...*

The word is *because* – because of God's love. We don't get from suffering to endurance to character and then to hope without the because. Because God's love has been poured into us. Because God is ruler over death. Because God can forgive our sins. Because God can conquer evil. Because God can redeem suffering. Our God is big.

In these summer months, let us remember that we because of God we are free to be hopeful. Embrace that gift and live into that freedom. Amen.

