

Second Sunday in Lent B**“Joy to Love and Everything In-between”****Romans 5:3-5**

More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering 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 who has been given to us.

I had a wedding once where I asked the groom, “Do you, John, take Jane to be your wedded wife, to have and to hold from this time forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health.” He thought about that for a moment before he said, “I’ll take better, richer and health please.” (No, that did not really happen, but I did see it in a cartoon once.) We who are married know that it does not work that way. There are days of worse, months of poorer and even years of sickness that happen in a marriage. But that is life lived in the real world, the rebellious world, the sinful world.

But ironically enough, that world tries to convince us that it should not be so. Pay no attention to the reality behind the curtain. Instead live the fantasy life of video games full of action and excitement, thrills and pleasure. The message of the world is that this life should be a candy land utopia where every day is happy/happy, every activity is fun/fun and every life is easy/easy. In this life there should be no pain, no suffering, and no trouble of any kind. And if such alien attitudes attack us or terrible trials terrify us, we can cocoon ourselves into a physical fortress, insulate ourselves by an artificial high or escape to our own personal playground where none of that yucky bad stuff can touch us.

Parents participate in this deception when we try to keep every trouble, pain and heartache away from our children. Yes, it is hard to see them suffer, but those tough times teach them life lessons. Schools participate in this deception when they provide students with entertainment that amuses them instead of an education that instructs them. Yes, it is hard work to teach knowledge and skills, but that is what will serve those children as adults. Churches even participate in this deception when they offer the fun, excitement and good times of a Sunday morning sight and sound show, but do not proclaim God’s Word which prepares their people for spiritual reality, times of temptation, a life of letdowns and the day of death.

Life in the real world requires responsibility. It takes work to live from one day to the next. Children like to say that things are boring, but that is life, isn’t it? There are dishes to clean, laundry to be done, a lawn to be mowed, a car to repair, and

a job to do. Sickness happens. We do not live in a no trouble bubble. But once world has convinced us that our days should be filled with fun and excitement, and that's not happening in our lives, then we will turn to addictive actions, artificial means and dangerous behaviors to get the highs which the world has promised us and that we think should fill every one of our days.

But the suffering of this sin-sickened and enslaved world is transformed for us by God's gracious relationship with us. He has given His one and only Son into this life of suffering for us to free us from suffering's claim upon us. The peace that Jesus has won between our Maker and us and the victory over sin, death and the devil that Jesus gives us cannot be taken from us by the suffering of this world. In 2nd Corinthians 4 Apostle Paul says, "Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all."

I heard once that having a stroke pushes a person's personality more to its extreme. If you were mean and nasty before, you will be worse after it. Or, if you were sweet and kind before the stroke, you will be more so after it. This weekend I heard on the radio that money can do the same thing to a person. A generous person will become even more so with more money to give away, while a greedy person will become even more stingy once acquiring greater riches. On this passage from Romans 5 Martin Luther makes a similar comment. He says that whatever suffering finds in us, it develops more fully. Suffering does not make us impatient, it just proves that we are impatient. We learn from suffering how our heart is constituted.

This past pandemic year the world around us has convinced us to bow down to the false god of self-preservation. To avoid any suffering and to fend off a feared death, we have cut ourselves off from family, friends, worship, service, recreation, socialization, basically from life as we knew it. While we are not looking for suffering and we are not asking for trouble, our stance of faith knows that God can and does produce good things in us through the suffering He allows for us. Back to Luther, who says that suffering takes everything from us and leaves us destitute. Suffering keeps us from seeking salvation in our own good works. Suffering causes us to despair of every creature and finally to seek help from God alone. That's a good thing.

Jesus in our Gospel reading today tells His disciples "the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. Peter can't handle the thought of Jesus

suffering and rebukes Him, “No, Lord, not You.” But Jesus rebukes Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You do not have your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” To be our Savior, Jesus has to suffer, for us, on account of our sins. He did so for us upon the cross. To rise to His glory as victor over the grave for us, Jesus first had to die the death we deserve.

As the people of such a suffering Savior, we also will experience suffering. But God uses these times to develop in us endurance, that patience which puts up with troubles and waits out hard times. That endurance develops the character of our Christian lives. Character is the result of being tested. Character is formed by the experiences of our lives. Character is how we live a life of lessons learned. People talk about the wrinkles of their skin as being character lines. The suffering that we endure in our Christian lives produce the character lines of our Christian living. Character produces hope. Christian hope is not the wishful thinking of this world. It is not whistling in the dark or singing through the cemetery. Our Christian hope is sure and certain because it relies upon God’s promises and it trusts in Christ’s works.

This hope does not put us to shame. This hope does not let us down or leave us hanging. This hope is fueled by God’s love for us. Notice that God’s love is not dripped or drabbed into our lives in a meagerly, piecemeal fashion. Instead, this love of God is so abundant and available that it is poured into our hearts. This happens by the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit in us through God’s Word of the Bible and His sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper shows us that our hope is in the right place. The Holy Spirit is our heavenly Father’s downpayment now of the salvation that Jesus has won for us already and of the life He is preparing for us to live with Him eternally.

If our Christian lives were like playing the game of Jeopardy, the category of suffering would be on the board. While it may not be our first pick, eventually we would have to make a selection from that category. Though we on our own cannot endure the suffering of this world, Jesus has taken our sins from us and has suffered unto death on account of them. Now our Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit surrounds our short-term sufferings with joy in them, hope through them and love conquering them. Amen.