

Paul's Letter to the Romans 5:1-5

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 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.

So, who feels like boasting this morning? On some levels, its a boasting time of year - I graduated from Seminary last friday! Are there any other occasions to boast about? graduations, accomplishments, particular talents, any grandparents here who like to boast about their grandkids? Maybe even the congregation can boast just a little that last week, you really brought the house down with an amazing pentecost service! I know that there was alot of hard work and energy that went into it.

Paul tells the congregation to which he is writing in Rome that "we boast in our hope" As Christians, we are a community built on the very hope of a resurrected Christ. It is out of that hope that we too can hope for the birthing of a world free of suffering, a world where there are none crucified, whether by the suffocation of oil leaking into the gulf, or by the slow death of persistent poverty, or the shrapnel of a bomb.

We boast in our hope, the hope that compels us to act in particular ways in the world, whether it be educating about and practicing body justice and healthy sexuality, or reducing our carbon footprint, or working for a just immigration reform, or raising funds for scholarships for youth in El Salvador. It is in this hope that we challenge empire and and work to build and authentic, inclusive community in the face of a society that wants to commodify us. Paul tells us that we are called to boast in this hope.

But we all know that there are times in our lives when that hope is sometimes harder to see and touch. Sometimes it is only the memory of the hope that keeps us. Sometimes we have to trust that other people are carrying that hope when we cannot bear to. Of course, in times such as those, who has the energy to boast? It would seem hardly appropriate even if we did!

But, after Paul instructs the Romans that they are to boast in their hope, he goes onto say that they are also called to boast in their suffering. Ok, what? Could he really mean that? and if he does, what does he really mean by boasting?

Paul is a pretty interesting guy. His writings have so often been used in hurtful ways throughout history - to tell us that our bodies are bad and only vehicles for sin, that women should keep silent in church, that slaves should obey their masters, that homosexuality is a sin... the list goes on. It is a sin how much Paul's writings have been misread and misused to hurt people over the years and still today. But I like what my professor said about Paul - that Paul is much more of a poet than a theologian. A friend of mine wrote his master's thesis on looking at Paul as a

community organizer. Particularly looking at this text today, And I would even argue that he is much more of a pastor than a theologian too. As Paul is writing this letter to the Romans, he is writing to a particular christ community in Rome, in a particular situation. He was speaking to a ragtag bunch of Jews and Gentiles, which, was not a singular group but rather the peoples of all the nations that had been conquered by the Roman Empire. We was writing to them to promote unity. and to encourage them in difficult times.

So, Those things that make Paul compelling to me are what also makes me keep listening as he continues in our passage for today. Paul is telling the Romans not only to boast in their hope, but that they must also boast in their sufferings.

When I read this, I had to step back for a moment and ask myself: what does Paul mean by boast? In my attempt to understand, i thought, and I prayed, and discerned, and then I looked it up in the dictionary. So this is what I found:

According to Webster, boasting has two definitions the first is: **1** : to puff oneself up in speech : speak vaingloriously or to speak of or assert with excessive pride. That's the one I think we most turn to when we hear it. But here is the second definition of boasting;

2 a : to possess and often call attention to **b** : to have, to contain. example: <a room *boasting* no more than a desk and a chair>

Boasting under the second definition means nothing more than saying it like it is. This is where I am. I have hope. I suffer. The truth is, most of the time we probably have both those things going on at the same time.

What this passage offer me is permission. It is permission to be where we are - somewhere in that strange space of hope, and loss, and suffering, grief, of searching, of possibility not yet realized. It doesn't sound very glamorous, but it does speak to the working of the holy spirit in places we might not always think to look. In those hard spaces. In the unclear, all jumbled up, one minute there is a spark of clarity and inspiration, the next a deep sadness and sense of loss spaces. The spirit moves as we endure.

Paul tells us that suffering produces endurance. And what is endurance? It is a weighty word. We were talking quite a bit about endurance at Bible study on Wednesday and when we pondered the meaning of endurance, someone said "it is permission to feel grief." It is permission to feel grief without pushing it away, pretending it isn't there, or closing yourself off from those difficult moments.

Many of you may know Mario Hawell. She is a long time member of Tab, who, because of her age has not been at Tab for some years now, but is none the less very much present in the community. I was fortunate to meet Mario in my first months of attending Tab, and the first thing that comes across in meeting her is her sharp wit and bright spirit. I would consider her something of a community sage and from time to time I hear her referenced in conversations and more than once in sermons here! Mario is someone who spoke her life and her story into the community in her presence and in that, the grace presence in the messiness. Mario is someone who has suffered from depression in her life. When speaking to that experience with someone in

the community, she said “Sometimes we are called to create, and sometimes we are called to endure.”

In considering this text we cannot lose sight of the fact that Paul’s writings were letters written to churches throughout the Roman empire, churches facing persecution, communities of people living the highs and lows of community life. Despite some of the crazy ways that Paul’s writings have been used in the church throughout history, when I read this passage of Romans, I hear the words of a person who is pastoring through his writings to people who may feel abandoned, or on their own. In a place where they must endure.

We, individually and as a community, are shifting, and changing. We are a people coming, and going, and many of us staying. Our hope changes over time, shifts, becomes something new. It gives birth to new hopes. It informs us and compels us. Hope lets us dream. And hope contains all that shifting and moving and uncertainty, because it does not contain the arrival to that place, but the hope that that place is there.

So, on that note, I would like to end with a song. This may be the only time in my life you will hear me say that, you can note that while I do “like” singing, I don’t often subject others to it. But this song has been on my heart all week speaking to me to me in conversation with me, and Tab, and Paul’s letter to the Romans, and so I thought I would share it with you and ask you to sing it with me. The words are fairly simple, and, maybe, some of you already know it please don’t be shy. I will sing it through once, then please join in.

We are going, heaven knows where we are going,
We'll know we're there.
We will get there, heaven knows how we will get there,
We know we will.

It will be hard we know
And the road will be muddy and rough,
But we'll get there, heaven knows how we will get there,
We know we will.

We are going, heaven knows where we are going,
We'll know we're there.

Amen.