

Sermon Pentecost 2A - Drive-In Worship

All Saints, Mt. Pleasant

Rev. Ginger Litman-Koon

June 14, 2020

Romans 5:1-8 1

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. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

+ + +

*Someone's crying Lord, Kum Ba Yah. Someone's crying Lord, Kum Ba Yah  
Someone's crying Lord, Kum Ba Yah. O Lord, Kum Ba Yah*

If there ever was a universally recognized Christian spiritual song, it's "Kum Ba Yah." The song was popularized by a Christian Folk group who toured the country with the song, claiming that the words song and phrase "Kum Ba Yah" were brought over by a missionary returning from Angola, Africa. However, no such words or phrase exist in the Luvale language or any other related dialect in or around Angola.

Further investigation into the song actually revealed that "Kum Ba Yah" is not from an imported language at all, but instead originated in the Gullah-Geechee traditions of the South Carolina and Georgia islands. The earliest known recording of the song is from 1920s Georgia is true to the Gullah pronunciation "Come by Yah." The origins of that most famous song are from right here in the Lowcountry. And they speak, not of touchy-feely campfire spirituality, but of the deep, real, soul-longing for the presence of the living Christ. You could almost say it's the Gullah version of the ancient Aramaic plea *Maranatha*, meaning "Come, Lord."

*Someone needs you Lord, Come by Yah. Someone needs you Lord, Come by Yah  
Someone needs you Lord, Come by Yah. Oh Lord, Come by Yah*

Someone needs you, Lord. In this world, in our nation, here in this community, Someone needs you. Someone is suffering, someone's heart is breaking, someone is in despair. We hear about suffering in our lesson today from Romans. Paul writes: "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us." Right now, we can all attest to the fact that suffering is all around us right now, If we open our ears, we can hear the cries of our neighbors, our fellow citizens.

Somewhere, someone is suffering with a terrible illness. They are sick, they are in pain, they are fighting for breath. Family members are isolated from one another, torn between their deep desire to be with their loved ones, and their need to stay well in order to cover their responsibilities. Somewhere, someone is sick, Lord... but it's not me.

Somewhere, someone is fighting for life. Perhaps not their own, but for the lives of their African-American brothers, fathers, sons. They are shouting for justice, but sometimes it feels like they're screaming into a vacuum. They're exhausted, but they know they cannot give up the fight. Somewhere, someone has buried a loved one killed in the street... but not me.

Somewhere, someone is hungry. They've had to make a decision between going to work to provide for their family and putting their family at risk due to an unsafe work environment. Someone is visiting the food pantry and trying to stretch a recipe until they can afford to get some meat for the freezer and something special for their child's upcoming birthday. Somewhere, someone is lacking basic human needs... but not me.

We are living in a strange time, where there is real, human suffering going on all around us. We're living under this cloud of sickness, injustice and need, and yet for most of us, we're fine. We know there is illness, but we're well. We are confronted with wrong, but we're alright. We're aware of need, but it doesn't really affect us. So when we encounter a passage like the one from Romans today, I'd say we have a complicated relationship with suffering right now.

Yes, we are all having to endure the difficulties of quarantine. Some of us are not able to work, others of us have more work than we can handle. Some of us may feel isolated or alone, others of us may be feeling the effects of physical or mental health conditions... But compared with the suffering we are hearing about in the ICUs and in the streets of our country right now, we're OK. So, how do we reconcile the dissonance between the extreme hardships of some and the relative comfort of others?

Well, let's take another listen to Paul's words. He says, we "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." We boast in "OUR sufferings," he doesn't say my suffering or your suffering, but OUR suffering. This passage is not just talking about individual hardships that certain people have to deal with. This is a collective statement of faith, boldly claiming strength through weakness, not just for the individual believer, but as the whole Body of Christ.

Just as Christ, through weakness, won the victory over suffering and death on the cross so too, the Body of Christ - and every one of us as members of it - triumphs TOGETHER when we come TOGETHER to rise up and overcome the sufferings at hand. Why? Because "God's love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit given to us" We can overcome the effects of the suffering in our nation because God's love was poured into our hearts - not to be kept inside as our own personal balm - but to overflow from us as an ointment for the healing of the entire Body of Christ. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians: "If one member [of the body] suffers, all suffer together with it." In this time, so many hurts and needs are coming to the fore: The Coronavirus epidemic, the evils of systemic racism and worsening economic inequality in this country.

As the need for continued work to combat racial inequality in America has been highlighted once again by the death of George Floyd and others, Presiding Bishop Eaton has addressed the need for us in the church, who may not be the target of racism ourselves, to work intentionally to recognize the ugly realities that members of minority communities face, and furthermore to strive - as members with them of the one body - to understand the hurt of others, to bear the burdens they bear, to refuse to become numb to the sufferings of some members, so that the body may begin to heal. "Until a white majority feels," Bishop Eaton wrote, "so deeply in our soul that the pain of black and brown people is our own pain, it will continue to be dangerous to be black and brown in America."

Real change can only happen when we begin to understand that pain. And I'd challenge us to expand that statement. To say until we feel deeply in our soul that the pain of others - whatever its source - is our own

pain, then it will continue to endanger the health of the Body of Christ. “When one member suffers, all suffer together with it.” And if we think that the body is healthy, even while its members are crying out in suffering, then we are only kidding ourselves. (

I know we do feel the weight of the sufferings of others at this time. I know you. You are compassionate people. You have empathy for the pain of others. And you respond when presented with any opportunity to help and offer relief. So if we already have this weight on our hearts because of the ongoing suffering, how do we more fully feel “deeply in our souls” the pain of others, as Bishop Eaton puts it? Are we supposed to sit around in despair and self-flagellation until we feel bad enough? ...No. Wallowing in pity and guilt doesn’t get us anywhere. But we begin - through prayer, through study, through caring conversations, through listening - to let the Holy Spirit do its work its heart-softening and soul-opening work of reconnecting the broken and disjointed Body of Christ, one member to another.

As we begin to more fully live into our true interconnectedness, and to realize our vital union through Christ’s saving lifeblood flowing through each and every one of us, then we get back to what Paul commends to us today that we may “boast in our sufferings.” The point is not to wallow in our sufferings, but to get to the place where we can boast in them, because, through Christ, we will overcome them. The pain experienced by the body is not good in themselves. But the outcomes that we can achieve when we get through them together, that’s where things get good.

That’s where we build character, endurance and hope as a community. Studying this passage, I wondered a bit about that word “character.” What does it mean? What did Paul mean by it? Another way to translate Paul’s word choice here is “proven character” or “experience.” Character is nice to have, but Proven character, courage, built through experience - those are assets invaluable to a community whose goal is growth. A community with character is one that has proven its ability to rise above, and to build upon past hardships. A body with character is one that has acknowledged the pain and instead of ignoring it, has grown stronger because of it.

We did not ask for the present suffering - although unknowingly, we may have contributed to it. But if we allow the Spirit’s work to bind us together in spite of it, we will - as a church, and as a nation - one day be so bold as to boast in our sufferings because we will ALL have come out stronger on the other side. Paul says that the result of our character building endurance is hope. And, our reading today says, “hope does not disappoint us.” But instead, I like the translation of that verse that reads “Endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and of HOPE we will not be ashamed.”

No matter what present sufferings we feel in our selves or our neighbors, and no matter what else - God forbid - this season may throw at us, we will continue to be people of HOPE, and of that hope we will not be ashamed. We will be so bold to have hope, in the face of despair, because we know the victory won by our Lord Jesus Christ has prepared for us the final victory over the powers of this world And has prepared us for victory in the fight for justice, healing and wholeness for his body, in his name.

Thank you Lord! We love you Lord. We need you Lord. *Maranatha! Come by Yah.*