

“Boasting in Hope”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Romans 5: 1-8

This week I had my first doctors’ visits since the pandemic hit us three months ago. For some of you, you’ve already experienced what this new normal is like, to go to a medical office setting. For me, this was my first experience, and I have to say I was impressed.

The one I was most desperate to go to was my eye doctor appointment on Thursday. Initially, I was supposed to see the eye doctor in March for my annual exam, which is also when I would get a new prescription for my contact lenses. I had to stretch the last two sets of contacts much longer than I normally would wear them, but thankfully I made it to this week. I was impressed with the protocols the office had in place: waiting in the car until it was time for my appointment; screening with health questions and temperature checks; clear signage marking exam rooms as clean and sanitized; everyone wearing masks and protective eye wear. It gave me a sense of confidence and assurance that I and the staff were being kept safe – something, I believe, which is also guiding our decisions here at John Knox for whenever the time is right to hold in-person worship again.

Now the appointment I wasn’t desperate to go to – and frankly, I’m never desperate to go to – was the dentist on Wednesday. Even though our dentist and his staff are the nicest people you’ll ever meet, I always dread going for my six-month cleaning because of the pain I’m inevitably in afterwards. And now, on top of that apprehension was the anxiety of going to the dentist in the midst of a pandemic, where the primary way this virus is transmitted is through droplets and aerosols. What would this be like?

Again, I was impressed with the steps that the office had taken to protect the patient and staff throughout the process. There were all the steps I mentioned earlier, but at the dentist’s office, the staff were dressed in protective gear that made them look like they were in an operating room. They spread out the appointments so that full cleaning and sanitizing could take place. Every effort was made to limit any sort of congregating in close, confined spaces. And what was reassuring is that everyone was their usual, welcoming selves. There may have been these layers of protective gear between us, but it was the same people underneath.

I have to admit that when I read this passage from Romans, I first thought of the ways I “boast in my sufferings” and cry, “Woe to me!” Going to the dentist is one of the ways I boast in my sufferings, to be

sure. My family is also quick to point out the other ways I shower self-pity on myself for attention. You don't have to worry about me getting too big of a head; my family keeps me humble, to be sure!

But this passage is not about the trivial sufferings we go through like doctor's appointments. Paul is speaking in this text about the real, life-altering pain and suffering we endure. Grief, illness, addiction, ridicule, hatred - these are human experiences which shape and form us, causing us to lose hope for the future. As we will learn, though, when we live through such suffering in this life, we are never alone. And those experiences produce endurance, character, and hope - "hope that does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (5:5).

In many respects, this passage from Romans is the culmination of Paul's theology of justification by faith alone. As one commentator says: *(This is) the fulfillment of God's promised righteousness, as Paul expounds the fruits of God's justification of sinners. He begins chapter 5 with the assumption that justification is already complete: "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith." What follows can be described as the consequences or fruits of justification. Paul names two of them: as a result of our justification through faith in Christ's righteousness, "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:1), and we have the "hope of sharing the glory of God" (5:2). In other words, we enjoy peace in the present and hope for glory in the future* (Garret Green, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2011: 134).

Wasn't it usually our parents who would say to us, "Don't brag or make yourself higher than someone else - be humble and don't boast." Then how do we reconcile what Paul says here: "And we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, we boast in our sufferings?" Are we supposed to brag about the times we suffer, or toot our own horn about our faith in God?

Boasting makes it sound like we're showering attention on ourselves. What if we thought of that phrase as "sharing our sufferings with others", or "bearing witness to the hope we know in Jesus Christ?" Because at the heart of what Paul is describing here is telling others of the hope we have in Jesus Christ. By being honest and transparent with friends and strangers about our struggles, our doubts, and our sufferings, we are allowing the Spirit of God to work in, around, and through us. And in those conversations, God produces endurance for the journey, character as part of our identity, and hope for a future which is promised by God.

We certainly know that we can never make it through this journey called life on our own. If this time of quarantine and isolation has taught us anything, it is that we are dependent on others to live fully in our physical, emotional, and spiritual health. Some of us feel weaker than others, and that can cause us to wander, to struggle, to even despair.

Listen to Paul's words: "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 were still sinners Christ died for us" (5:6-8). God loves us so much – God loves you so much – that God's own Son gave his life so that we might be forgiven and freed from sin. We didn't do anything to earn or deserve that. That was God's choice, that was God's decision. Which is why in our weakest moments, we are given strength beyond what we could produce ourselves.

Diane Moffett is the president and executive director of the Presbyterian Mission Agency of our denomination, and she writes the following: *Our tested character is what produces the hope that Paul speaks of in verses 4-5. It is a hope that we are sure of because "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (5:5). This love so saturates the being of the believer in his or her present predicament that he or she is certain of the hope, even though it is yet to come. It is this understanding of what is yet to come that led writers of the Negro spirituals to compose songs such as "Nobody Knows the Trouble I See." The opening lines of the melody tell of the trouble the African slave knows in America:*

"Nobody knows the trouble I see. Nobody knows but Jesus.

"Nobody knows the trouble I see. Glory, Hallelujah!"

The words speak of the present and that which is to come. Many African slaves endured the suffering of slavery because they knew the present power of God's love and the future glory that awaited them. What Christians know about the future inspires us to act appropriately in the present. The future glory is not to be used as an anesthesia or opiate to make us passively accept pain. Rather, the love of God is so powerful that it sustains us through suffering and empowers us to act according to our faith (ibid, 136-138).

We have witnessed a lot of suffering in our world these last three months, and especially these last three weeks. We have seen refrigerated trucks turned into morgues outside city hospitals. We have heard from health care workers who are utterly exhausted after caring for unending numbers of coronavirus patients. We have watched George Floyd die on the streets of Minneapolis at the hands of police officers. We have experienced protests all across this country with a fierceness and urgency which feels different and greater than anything we have experienced in the past.

There has been tremendous suffering by God's people. And God's love is sustaining God's people through this suffering, and so we are empowered to act according to our faith. We are empowered to care for the most vulnerable in our community, so that no one feels isolated or alone. We are empowered to advocate on behalf of the voiceless, so

that their health and rights are protected as a part of the human family. We are empowered to work for change in our justice system, so that justice is enacted equitably and fairly to all. We are empowered to witness to others - to boast, you might say - that our God is one who will pour his love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, and in so doing, the church is living out its calling to go, baptize, teach, and serve in Christ's name.

“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ . . . and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God” (5: 1-2). As we move through these challenging times, may we share with others the hope we hold onto as children of the living God, a hope which empowers us in the present to be the disciples of Christ we are called to be, since “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (5:5).

Thanks be to God. Amen.