

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

“Rejoicing In Our Sufferings” ~ Romans 5:1-11

What do you think of when you hear the word “suffering”? The dictionary says that “suffering” means “the state or experience of enduring pain, distress or death.” And, I might add, it’s the state or experience that most of us, by nature, try to avoid. If only we could eliminate suffering, we say, what a wonderful world this would be. And yet, of course, we can’t and we know that we can’t. We see suffering on all sides – in the lives of others as well as in our own lives – emotional, mental, physical, spiritual suffering – and yet in spite of our best efforts to do away with it or to avoid it altogether, suffering continues.

So if we can’t do away with it and we can’t avoid it, what can we do about it? Many would say, well, I guess I’ll just have to live with it, grit my teeth and endure it just like the definition says. But St. Paul has a better idea about what we Christians are to do about suffering in today’s epistle lesson from Romans. His encouragement is to rejoice in it! To which we may say, he’s got to be kidding! It’s impossible to rejoice in one’s sufferings – that’s what makes them sufferings. But to understand Paul’s point we have to back up a little and start from the beginning.

Paul knew that all of our sufferings were, in one way or another, the result of sin. In the beginning when God created mankind, there was no such thing as suffering for there was no such thing as sin. But when mankind broke that perfect relationship with God for which they were created and fell into sin, suffering entered the world. And because of sin, suffering – in all of its forms – has continued to be a part of the human experience. And ever since the fall, mankind, by nature, has tried to deal with suffering but, unfortunately, only with its symptoms and not with its cause.

But God, in His infinite love for mankind, promised to deal with the cause – to deal with our sin for us. And so He promised to send a Savior – one who would deal with our sin in the only way it could really be dealt with – by paying for it – and by dying for it – so that all who repent of their sin and turn to that Savior in faith might be forgiven and have a new life and be saved. And that, of course, is exactly what happened in and through the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Savior of the world. In fact, that’s what this Lenten season reminds us of – of how Jesus suffered and died on our behalf so that we no longer have to suffer and die on our own behalf. We are, Paul says, justified by faith – that is, we are made right with God once again by grace through faith in this Jesus and because we are we now have peace with God. Now the dictionary defines “peace” as just the opposite of suffering. It is, by definition, “a state of tranquility or quiet.” So how can one who has faith in Jesus have peace on the one hand and yet still experience suffering on the other? Isn’t that a contradiction?

Not at all, Paul says. For while we are free from the punishment of our sin by grace through faith in Jesus, we still suffer from the consequences of our sin and the sin all

around us. But the peace which we now have with God transforms our suffering from merely something to endure to something that helps us to grow – to grow in grace – to grow in faith – to grow in hope. That’s why Paul says we know that suffering produces perseverance and perseverance produces character and character produces hope. And this hope doesn’t disappoint us because God has poured His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom He has given us.

It’s been said that when life’s possibilities are without meaning, hope ends and despair takes over. Victor Frankl, a noted psychiatrist who endured the horrors of a Nazi prison camp during World War II, said in his book, “Man’s Search For Meaning,” that even in the most vicious of circumstances man may succeed if life continues to have meaning.

Before Jesus suffered and died he said, “Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, it is for this purpose that I have come to this hour.” You see, Jesus’ life had meaning that not only suffering but even death could not destroy. And the Bible says, “for the joy set before him he endured the cross.” So it is for us as well.

You see, suffering, in whatever form it comes, leaves us with two options. Either we can focus on the suffering itself and, in that, be driven away from God or we can focus on the peace that we have with God through Christ in the very midst of our suffering and, in that, be brought closer to Him.

Doris Lund writes about her son who suffered from leukemia. He was young, an athlete, ready for college when the disease struck. But rather than going to college he spent much of his time in and out of hospitals. It was on one such occasion when he was in the hospital that she wrote this – “I was in the room with my son, leaning against a wall, when I heard what was not so much a groan as it was a monotonous, steady protest coming from the next room. It was a woman’s voice, gasping at regular intervals. And there was nothing to muffle her groans. I asked my son if the sound bothered him. It would bother me more if she stops, he said. And then he shouted, “hang in there lady! Hang in there!”

You see, that’s what God is shouting to you and me in His Word again today. “Hang in there! I’m with you. And I’ll sustain you. And I’ll lead you through this even through that moment when the suffering stops and a new life begins.” May we hear what God has to say to us again this morning and, taking it to heart, may we believe and live according to it. And may we, in Christ, even dare to rejoice in our sufferings knowing that our God is with us and He will see us through to the end. In Jesus’ name. Amen.