

Glory and Suffering

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, May 30, 2010)

Romans 5:1-5 ¹Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and 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.

John 16:12-15 ¹²"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

It's all yours! The whole kit and caboodle, we might say. This is what Jesus promised to deliver to the disciples, and to us, through the Holy Spirit. Jesus told his disciples, "**All** that the Father has is mine." This is one of several teachings that helped the early Christians begin to understand the unity of God the Father and the Son of God, Jesus Christ. And as Jesus promised those early Christians the gift of the Holy Spirit, a gift to guide them in knowing all truth, the early Christians began to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Ghost. But rather than try to explain the Trinity on this Trinity Sunday, I want you to think for a moment what the Trinity, the experience of God in three persons, means for us, as disciples.

To begin, consider the words of Jesus in our Gospel Lesson: "All that the Father has is mine." Of course we are not talking about material things, and I don't think Jesus was talking about power, certainly not power to lord it over people, because he emphasized servanthood, not lordship, but I would suggest that we are talking about God's glory, and how Jesus was glorified.

When we think about glory, especially God's glory, we usually think about such concepts as majesty, and praiseworthiness or righteousness. How then does this glory rest on us? After all, we are made in God's image – where is our glory? Some days it is a little more than we can live up to, isn't it? It just doesn't fit in with our usual way of thinking – we have way too many days when we just don't feel that glorious or that praiseworthy.

Jesus knew this. This is why he told the disciples that he had many things to say to them yet, but it was more than they could bear, more than they could take in and understand. He knew that, and so he promised them the gift of the Holy Spirit, the spirit of Truth, who would guide them into all truth. Or as it says at the end of our short Gospel reading, the Holy Spirit will take what belongs to Jesus, and declare it to us, deliver it to us. All that glory which God has given to Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, is something that we can share in, just as Jesus shared in God's glory.

The Psalm this morning (Psalm 8) said it a little differently: "God made us just a little lower than God, and crowned us with glory and honor." That's a bit much, again, don't you think? That is almost more than we can live up to as well, isn't it? Me – crowned with glory and honor?

Or to put it another way, we might ask, if in am so glorious, with all this glory and honor and dominion, to use the words of the Psalm, why are there so many blah moments and days?

Erma Bombeck put it in delightful contemporary language when she wrote in the title of one of her books a few years ago: "If life is just a bowl of cherries, what am I doing down here in the pits?"

Or another way this question has often been asked, in a far more serious and profound manner, "If we are so blessed by God, why do we suffer?" If I had some good answers to that question, I would go and write books, and surely grow rich because I know a lot of people are looking for the answer to that

question. But in response to this question, I just want you to think about what Paul wrote to the Romans: Suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.

I warned you that the reading from Romans had a lot of depth, a lot of power. Perhaps a contemporary illustration can help us understand this more fully. Dr. Marlo Morgan, in her book “Mutant Message Down Under” writes about her experience of going on a “walkabout” with the aborigines of Australia. Do you remember that word, “walkabout,” made familiar to us by the Crocodile Dundee movies? When Dr Morgan arrived at the starting point for their “walkabout” she soon discovered that the word “walkabout” gives no hint to the extent of this exercise. It isn’t just a stroll in the park, it is more like a trek that takes weeks or even months to complete. The first thing the aborigine women did was to tell her to take off her shoes and start walking barefoot over the hot, stony ground. It hurt, but she really wanted to build a relationship with these women, so she decided to persevere. By evening she was in agony – her feet were bruised, bleeding and burned from the hot sand. The women rubbed ointment on her feet day after day, and day after day they continued encouraging and prodding her to walk about, barefooted, reminding her that if she did not undergo this period of toughening, the day would come when her shoes would be worn out, and where would they find new shoes here in the Outback of Australia. Eventually she discovered that what they had told her was true. She was able to keep pace with the other women, to walk barefoot like an aborigine.

This shouldn’t be too hard for us to understand here in North Carolina where we love to follow our favorite basketball team. Suppose for the next four years the coaches at Duke, Carolina, NC State and Wake Forest decided to practice only one evening a week. What kind of record do you think our teams would have? Would any teams from the ACC be worth watching, if they practiced so few hours? And on the other hand, I wonder, do the players complain when they have to practice so long and hard? Or do they understand that suffering through many practices produces strength and endurance, endurance that will last through the fourth quarter, and through the season, and hopefully into the glory of sweet sixteen, final four and national championship? The same is true in so many areas of life. Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and the chain continues.

A story is told about a boy who found a butterfly just breaking out of its cocoon. The creature seemed to be struggling incredibly. The crack in the cocoon was too small and the large body of the butterfly could not squeeze through. So the boy took a little knife and some tweezers and broke open the cocoon. But the butterfly didn’t fly away. Its wings were still creased and wet, they didn’t unfold, and the body seemed bloated out of proportion. In fact, this butterfly never flew; it only lived a few hours and then died. The struggle and strain of breaking out of the cocoon was necessary to burn the energy, so that this creature could unfold her wings and become what God intended, a butterfly.

So don’t complain about your suffering and your hardships and your challenges. Instead, ask yourself the question how this is building endurance and character and hope in you. What benefit might you derive by going through your struggle?

And remember, the hope you have is, as Paul writes, the hope of sharing in the glory of God. All that God has, all the glory of God, has been given to Jesus. The Holy Spirit will help us to understand this and receive this, in small doses, as we can bear it. Through our suffering we have the hope of sharing in God’s glory, and that hope will not disappoint us. Amen.