

Lent 3 A

March 27, 2011

Romans 5:1-11

Do you ever wonder why places have the names that they have? I understand Monches is named for an Indian chief. Not sure about Colgate. Erin probably stems from some Irish settlers. My home town of Burlington, Iowa, was named by an early settler from Burlington, Vermont. There are more than a dozen other Burlingtons in the nation and Canada. Our Exodus lesson this morning names two places in the wilderness where Israel wandered for years. One place, called Massah, is so named because it locates where the Israelites quarreled. The other place, Meribah, gets its name from the Hebrew word for “tested.” The quarrelling and testing of the people against Moses and their God was significant enough to name the places so nobody ever after would forget what happened there. In our nation, we have strong associations of some historic events with places where memorable things happened: Lexington and Concord, Gettysburg, Appomatox, Wounded Knee.

I sometimes wonder why churches are named what they are. In the Evangelical tradition of our congregation, St John’s and St Paul’s were most common, as in the congregational tradition there are lots of churches named Pilgrim, Plymouth and Mayflower. More than likely our St Paul’s was named for another congregation named St Paul’s that was known to one or more of the founders or early members. In its beginnings our church was known around here simply as “The Protestant Church,” no doubt differentiating it from the Roman Catholics who settled here, too. But somewhere back there in the recesses of history, some group of church founders decided that they wanted St Paul the Apostle as their namesake/patron. Why, do you suppose?

Our text today from Paul’s letter to the Romans would be a good place to put your finger down among all the things that the Apostle wrote about in all the letters to the Romans, the Galatians, the Corinthians, the Ephesians and so on. One of Paul’s great themes is justification and reconciliation by grace through faith. Paul’s letters can be tough going, and Romans can be toughest of the tough, as we try to wade through his first century rhetoric and long-winded syntax. It would be tough for Paul to get far with Twitter. Some of his sentences and paragraphs go on and on. But today’s text is pretty tight and concise, and it is arguably the core of his most important, weighty and influential letter:

*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.*

Here are Paul's key words, all strung together in one sentence: justified, faith, peace, grace, hope and glory.

But he is not writing about abstract theological principles. He is writing about human suffering, and he moved directly to add: *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.*

Whether in first century Rome or twenty-first century Japan, there is no time or place in history when suffering has not been a signature of the human condition. Notice that Paul does not say faith will wipe out suffering. But he does say that suffering produces hope, by way of endurance and character. Notice that Paul does not say that suffering is a sign of God's disfavor, a punishment for wrongdoing. But he does say that suffering can be redemptive, if lived from a perspective of faith. Notice that Paul does not say that we can earn God's favor or find peace with God—even in suffering-- through our own moral efforts. But he does say that we have access to grace through Jesus Christ, whose suffering on the cross redeems everything, even our suffering.

It is no accident that Christian faith thrives where people suffer. Especially in impoverished Latin America and Africa, Christians cling to the cross for dear life. The suffering and death of Christ "for us" helps to make our own suffering bearable; for just as resurrection means that death does not have the last word, so the cross means that suffering does not have the last word either, but rather, as Paul says, "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us..."

Paul himself suffered. He wrote of it frequently, not to put himself above others, but to place himself squarely in their midst as a fellow sufferer. He never got too specific about his own suffering, other than to say it was a thorn in the flesh that he prayed that God would remove. Since God had not removed it, Paul decided he would boast of his sufferings. Listen to his words from his second letter to the Corinthians:

*And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being*

*too elated. Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12:7-10)*

Later in Romans Paul says that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. Then he goes on to speak of the world's suffering in terms of the labor pains of a woman in childbirth. "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now." (Romans 8:18-27)

Outside of faith, we are likely to interpret our sufferings as nothing more than punishment, the fates' conspiracy to make us miserable and to head us off from the possibility of any happiness. But Paul lends us his lenses of faith to replace the specs of fate. Through these lenses we see suffering as producing endurance, endurance producing character and character producing hope, a hope that does not disappoint us. We are saved by grace through faith. This is the heart of the gospel. We need this message especially when we suffer. When we are tired, weak and worn (In the immortal words of Thomas Dorsey); "When our life is almost gone. Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light, take my hand, Precious Lord, lead me home."

In my comfortable middle class life, I recall wondering at a young age what exactly we were being saved from by grace through faith, according to the gospel. I no longer believed that salvation was only about a fork in the eternal road, headed either to heaven or hell. I recall buying a little paperback book titled, *Saved from What?* These are the idle speculations that afflict the comfortable. But Paul writes about the desperation of the afflicted who seek comfort, who stand on tip toes to see if the sun will rise once again in the east. Paul stands in solidarity with those who sufferings are real, not imagined. And he stands there because that is where Jesus Christ stands. That is where the cross stands on Mount Calvary, outside the protective walls that surround the city of Jerusalem, at Golgotha, the place of the skull. Those who suffer, whether from mental distress, hunger, sickness, unemployment, political upheaval or the devastation that follows an earthquake and tsunami, those who suffer do not need to ask what they long to be saved from. In Christ, by the grace of God, we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God, but the road to this place of salvation passes right through the middle of the valley of the shadow of death. There are no short cuts to Easter.

This is not to say that we should look for trouble or make ourselves miserable in some way in order to better hear the good news that is the gospel of God in Christ. But the fact is that those who suffer are first in line when it comes to the healing balm of faith. The fact is that we have greatest access to the grace of God when we are lost, alone, poor, homeless, exiled, in trouble, grieving, confused, alienated, beside ourselves in some way. The fact is, when we cannot save ourselves, God in Christ is there. The fact is, only when we are at our wits' end are we truly in a position to "boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God."

If you are looking for good news, you have come to the right place. St Paul's is aptly named. God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. What a fantastic gift, wrapped in grace for giving to any and all in need. Even us.