

FIRST LESSON: Lamentations 3: 22-26
SECOND LESSON: Romans 5:1-5
June 12, 2022

“Being Made Strong”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

I really wish there were an easier way to stay fit than exercise. Exercise is work. It just is. Exercise is hard even when it accomplishes something—like weeding the garden. People think I like gardening. I don’t. I like gardens, and the only way to get one is to do the work. If I could have a beautiful garden without all the backbreaking work, trust me I would! This year with everything going on with my parents I told a few summer plants struggling to emerge out from under the blanket of dying spring foliage, “You’re on your own guys. Give it your best shot.”

Faith is work too. We even say that we exercise our faith. Faith doesn’t take a stroll and lie in the sun. Faith requires effort. And the more we put our faith into practice the stronger it gets. But just like physical exercise, it is the heavier burdens that build muscle. When we use our faith in the tough times, when the resistance is great, it is then that our faith grows.

The apostle Paul begins our reading today speaking about being justified through faith and having peace with God. This is all a gift. He even goes so far as to say “we boast in the hope of the glory of God.” To be justified is a legal term. It means we have been made not guilty. We are guilty, but God has just taken our guilt away. It is gone. And because our guilt has been taken away by Christ we can enter God’s presence. For those into grammar, I know there has to be at least one of you, the word Paul uses is in what is called the “perfect tense”. It’s a done deal. It’s accomplished already. And because Christ has died for us and our guilt taken away, we have peace with God. We have been restored. God has welcomed us home. We haven’t crawled in the back door hoping no one will notice us. Like the prodigal come home we came in the front and were met with amazing grace.

We glory in what God has done for us! But Paul then goes on to speak a strange truth. We don’t only glory in the wonderful things, we glory in our sufferings.

Now I want to be clear. Suffering is not a good thing. Pain is not something we should seek out. BUT, it can be used for good in our lives in a powerful way, because “suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.” We want salvation to be about happily ever after. There are even some hymns and praise songs that make it sound that way. “At the Cross” by Isaac Watts includes the line, “And now I’m happy all the day.” Every time I have sung that line I have said to myself, **“I’m not.”** Grateful, yes, but happy? There are times when life is not happy, but that does not mean that I am being unfaithful to God when I don’t feel happy or that God

is being unfaithful to me bringing trouble down on my head. And unfortunately, there are always Christians out there who imply, or flat-out state, that if we are not completely chipper in the face of adversity we have failed in our spiritual duty. We should be cheerful regardless of what is going on. To that I have to say, was Jesus especially jovial at Gethsemane? If it is okay for Jesus to weep, it is okay for us to weep.

The kind of suffering Paul was speaking of is *thlipsis*. As a word it's a bit of a mouthful. But it's a specific kind of pain. It involves being under pressure. We feel confined. We are without options. There is no escape. It's the feeling of being trapped that distinguishes this word. We're trapped in grief, trapped in a bad relationship, trapped by hopelessness and despair. The pressure builds and it feels like there is no way out. And holding on to God under this kind of suffering is difficult. There's a temptation to think God has abandoned us.

Of course, it is possible to go through hardship and lose our faith. People do it all the time. But the fruit of that is bitter. We either walk away from God and become bitter or walk with God and become better. And truthfully, I don't know what it is that makes the difference. I don't know why some stay and others leave. How much is our choice and how much is the Holy Spirit working in us? I suspect that those who walk away did not really have deep roots in the first place, because knowing God, truly knowing God, changes us. I have doubted God. I have been furious with God. I have had times when I couldn't feel God at all. But I always come back to sit before God.

Faith in the dark times says, "I don't understand why, Lord. I don't understand anything to be honest. But I'm here waiting for you to lead me through this." In times like these, prayer can feel like cardboard in our mouths. We just endure a moment at a time. Even acknowledging that there is a god and it's not me is an effort. But walking with God through our suffering bears incredible fruit in our lives, fruit that we only see when the storm has passed, because on the other side we are not the same. We've acquired depth. We've acquired strength. We've acquired character. We have been changed in a profound and beautiful way.

Paul says that we glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces the ability to persevere. We are not quitters. We keep putting one foot in front of the other in hard times. And we develop patience and an understanding when things don't go our way. We learn that we cannot change others, only our response to them. We end up becoming the kind of person other people can rely on in times of need. Strength of character just does not develop without this kind of adversity. In the same way muscles do not grow stronger without lifting burdens, spiritual muscles do not grow stronger without enduring some heavy burdens along the way. A genuine person is one who has been tested and found true.

Suffering is not divine payback for sin. We don't experience tough times because we are being punished. Yet clearly God has not spared us struggle. We want everything to go our way. We want everything to be easy. But God knows that we would never mature that way. No matter how much we want it, a life of ease wouldn't actually be good for us.

We sing sometimes of being carried on eagles' wings, but eagles have a lot to teach us about the ways of God. Many of us have seen pictures of huge eagles' nests high in a tree or out-cropping of a cliff, but few realize that when an eagle pair start building their nest they use some very strange things. Broken branches and thorny vines are woven together. A sharp rock or two might be thrown in. The base of the nest is strong, but not exactly comfortable. The comfort comes last with a thick padding of wool, feathers, and fur from animals. The nest is very soft and comfortable for the eggs and the newborn eaglets. But children grow as we all know, and then the eagle parents encounter a problem. These teenagers don't want to leave the nest! Meals delivered right to them! A nice comfy bed! So the mother starts doing something called "stirring up the nest." She begins to pull up the thick carpet of fur and feathers with her talons. All of the sharp edges come to the surface. It gets downright uncomfortable, until finally the offspring are so miserable they launch themselves into the sky and fly. If life had stayed comfortable, they would have become disabled, unable to survive in the world.

God makes us strong in the challenges of life, and for that we can rejoice. But God is not crazy. God does not expect us to rejoice because of pain or grief or loss. No, we rejoice because of what God can do, of how God can take even our darkest days and bring forth light. Amen.

Lamentations 3: 22-26

- 22** Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.
- 23** They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
- 24** I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion;
therefore I will wait for him."
- 25** The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him,
to the one who seeks him;
- 26** it is good to wait quietly
for the salvation of the Lord.

Romans 5:1-5

5 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, **2** through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. **3** Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;**4** perseverance, character; and character, hope. **5** And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.