

Suffering, Endurance, Character, Hope?

Romans 5:1-8

June 18, 2017

Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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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. 6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. 7 Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. 8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

I. YOU ARE DIFFERENT, THAT IS SCARY.

Jesus died 33 CE, and there was a division between the Jews that followed Christ and the Gentiles (non-Jews) that followed Christ. There was the discrimination against the Jews from Roman Aristocrats and this was starting to trickle down to the Gentiles (non-Judean). Several Jews had been driven out and probably lost property and community ties during their exile from emperor Claudius around 49 CE, may have aroused tensions within house groups in which non-Judean ("Gentile") believers had become predominant. Some Jew's observed special diets and holy days and the Gentiles did not and this caused tension in the communities. Paul was concerned about the civil disturbance and discrimination toward the Jew's who followed Christ. This is the first reason this letter is written to the Roman followers of Christ. The second reason is because this was during the reign of Nero, emperor in Rome in about (54–68 CE). During the time this letter was written, it was not a cool time to be a Christian. To make a long story short, according to encyclopedia.com, it is said that Nero burned down the city of Rome in order to have a new palace built and played on the fear the people

of Rome had about these followers of Christ. It was said that these Christ followers were involved in "wicked practices". Nero initiated the later Roman policy of halfhearted persecution of the Christians. The suffering in this example is the persecution and discrimination for being different. This is unfortunately nothing new then or now.

I say all this to say that we as Christians have a history of suffering, endurance, character, and hope. The suffering is about others acting in fear about us and bring harm to us. Here is how I read this passage and the lens I'm going to take for this message, do not suffer in silence. I look at his words to boast about the suffering is to expose and reveal the suffering. In spite of the suffering which does not feel good remember that this suffering produces endurance. The weathough to be able to go forward. And this will build character. Differentiation. Equity or what I like to call, street credit. And the hope part is about your experience to teach and inspire someone else, because if you can do it, I can do it. The title of this sermon is Suffering, Endurance, Character, & Hope? Taken from Paul's words and the hope has a question mark on purpose. Hope is up to you.

II. THE LGBT COMMUNITY

I would be remissed if I didn't speak about the LGBT Pride parade happening in my city of Denver as we speak. But it is important to know why it is happening. Pride is celebrated in June because in the early hours of June 28, 1969, New York City police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay club located in Greenwich Village in New York City. The raid sparked a riot among bar patrons and neighborhood residents as police roughly hauled employees and patrons out of the bar, leading to six days of protests and violent clashes with law enforcement outside the bar on Christopher Street, in neighboring streets and in nearby Christopher Park. The Stonewall Riots served as a catalyst for the gay rights movement in the United States and around the world. The 1960s and preceding decades were not welcoming times for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Americans. For instance, solicitation of homosexual relations was illegal in New York City, and there was a criminal statute that allowed police to arrest people wearing less than three gender-appropriate articles of clothing. For such reasons, LGBT

individuals flocked to gay bars and clubs, places of refuge where they could express themselves openly and socialize without worry. However, the New York State Liquor Authority penalized and shut down establishments that served alcohol to known or suspected LGBT individuals, arguing that the mere gathering of homosexuals was “disorderly.” Thanks to activists’ efforts, these regulations were overturned in 1966, and LGBT patrons could now be served alcohol. But engaging in gay behavior in public (holding hands, kissing, or dancing with someone of the same sex) was still illegal, so police harassment of gay bars continued. **Let me be really clear, this is not an anti-police sermon. It is an anti-discrimination one.** Today, the LGBT community is more celebrated in the mainstream society but that still does not mean the fight for equality is over. There is still discrimination for housing and jobs just to give some quick examples of how the fight is not over. It's like saying racism is over because of President Obama and it clearly is not. Discrimination is alive and well.

I love marching with my UCC family during the pride parade to show that the church is doing something about it. We march to show the LGBT community that the UCC is supportive and that God unconditionally loves us all.

I personally know what it is like to preserve, have hope and give hope. The photo shown of me and my dad today was about my graduation from Iliff School of Theology. That was such a proud day because I endured so much to complete my studies.

III. THE WEIRDO THAT WENT TO THEOLOGY SCHOOL

My background is in vocal music. So, when God called me to ministry, I had no idea how that works. I was and still am a loud, weird, quirky, person that has trouble comprehending. I did not have a minister that I could look up to that was like me when I first got called to ministry. See, where I come from in south Mississippi, I have never seen a female minister. So when God called me metaphorically, I said you had the wrong number of course. It wasn't until 7 years after that day I said ok. Moved cross country got into grad school and had no idea what was going on. Everyone was saying all these fancy words and I was lost in the discussions all the

time. It was torture! I was suffering immensely. But I kept going back and enduring the suffering with the hope it will make sense. One day, it was not as painful anymore and made sense. Then it was building my character to have hope and give hope to the newer students that had no clue what was going on. I felt it was the right thing to do to support the new students coming in and having the deer in the headlight look.

IV. SO WHAT.... HOPE? OR HOPE!!!!

"In the End, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." "For evil to succeed, all it needs is for good men to do nothing." These are two of my favorite Rev Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr quotes. The reason the message title has a question mark after the hope is because it is up to us how the question is answered. It was not just a typo.

Hope is in us speaking up in our circles about injustice. There are many circles that you are invited to and I am not. It is one thing for me to speak of injustice in these circles but it is quite another for you all to expose it.

Hope is challenging the way things are and pushing the limits of what is possible. It's about changing our thinking and re-evaluating what is truly possible. It is very easy to buy into the societal expectation of what should be. As I mentioned earlier, according to societal standards: Christians do wicked practices, LGBT folks can be harassed because they are different, and Black Women can't be ministers. Who decides what is normal and acceptable and what is not. I definitely did not get a say. I was not at that table.

Hope is trusting in God and unconditionally loving each other. I did not say unconditional like each other but love in that be respectful and do not cause any ill will toward people. Even if they are disrespectful to you and curse your name. Love is about honoring each other, hearing each other, and supporting each other.

Hope is a choice. That is why the title of this message has a question mark after hope. We can choose to be Christlike and speak out against injustice, be kind to people that are like us and people that are different than us, and love unconditionally or not. It's our choice so choose wisely. Amen.

