

## **Romans 3:28-30; 5:1-11**

Books have been written about Paul's letter to the Romans. In addressing even this little snippet, it's hard to avoid falling into a deep dark hole wherein we parse words like "justification" and "righteousness" and ponder how God's wrath suddenly popped up just when we thought we'd all agreed that we were reconciled with God. In other words, it's hard to see the forest because there are so many trees. So I'm going to suggest the shape of the forest and then look at just a couple of the trees, and if anyone wants to buttonhole me later and argue about works and law, that's what coffee hour is for.

I think Paul is saying that we *do* have peace with God, we are reconciled with God, whether we're Jews or gentiles, and so therefore the struggles that we encounter can only be fruitful. They cannot destroy us because God has our back. As one of the little planters in this room says, "Grow through what you go through."

Paul seems to feel that it makes a big difference that "while we were still weak" Christ died for us. The dying for us, of course, is inseparable from the resurrection. Jesus went to the cross, willing to lose everything rather than take back anything he'd said or done to establish God's kingdom in contradistinction to the empire of Rome. The empire exercised the greatest power it has, which is to extinguish life. And then in the resurrection, God demonstrated greater power and a "deeper magic" or more fundamental rule, which is that love outweighs death. That's how we get to reconciliation with God, but Paul's focus here is on how Jesus did this before we even could claim to understand what he was doing, let alone deserve it. "While we were still weak" Christ died for us.

Then he speculates a little about what it takes to die for another person. It's rare that

someone dies for a "righteous" person, though sometimes they might for a "good" person. This may be a reference to the Roman patronage system, in which you get your protection and support from someone higher than you in the hierarchy, and for whom you therefore might be expected to sacrifice or die. Ultimately of course the highest patron is the emperor, and we're all supposed to be willing to die for him. But Christ died for us, lower on the heavenly totem pole than he is.

When I was teaching ethics, I used to start with the trolley problem, which goes like this: You are driving a trolley along its tracks, and suddenly you see a person ahead of you on the tracks. You try to brake, but the brakes have gone out. Fortunately, you can divert the trolley onto some other tracks. Unfortunately, there are five people standing on the other tracks. What do you do?

If you keep the discussion going long enough, eventually someone is going to try to evaluate the relative worth of the people on the tracks, as a way to decide who should die. In fact, pretty early on they play with the idea that anybody standing on trolley tracks deserves to die, but I point out that that's awfully harsh. What's interesting is to see the students try to come up with criteria for human worthiness. What if the one on the tracks is about to find a cure for cancer? What if the five on the tracks are homeless bums? What if they have families, or they don't have families? What if they're old, and going to die pretty soon anyway but their grandchildren who are in this class really really love them? or what if they're young, and have the potential to do wonderful things if they survive? And of course, none of their criteria work. Eventually we establish that even the most incorrigible drunk without family or home still does not merit being struck by a trolley, and we have to abandon that train of thought and use

another rule, not merit, to figure out what the driver should do. You can't rank people by their worth. Every human being has equal worth.

This "rightness with God," Paul argues, is why we can be unshaken by suffering. "We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup>and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup>and hope does not disappoint us." The rabbi who is half of the lectionary podcast team I listen to connected this--more intuitively than analytically--to a Talmudic discussion of whom to appoint to lead prayer. Apparently the rabbis discussed whether age should be the metric and decided not, whether education should be the metric, and rejected that too. Finally they decided that the person who leads prayer should be a man (because olden times) who has dependent children and is without means to care for them, who has to toil in the field to scrape together their daily meal. It should be this man, beset by worries and troubles, who should lead the community prayer, because his prayers are real. He has lots of experience, and when he prays throughout the day, he means it.

This brings to my mind the mother of the two Nicaraguan girls for whom I'm the guardian while their legal residency application is in process. The first time I met her in the office of [agency], JoAnn M., who runs the program with an attorney, was telling her and the older daughter what the steps were and about how long it might take. The mother was very calm and quiet, but I caught a flash of her inner agitation when JoAnn could not promise her a favorable outcome. It's just not up to us; it's up to a series of judges. The mother asked something in Spanish, and JoAnn looked at her for a moment and then said in Spanish, "We have to pray. God is powerful." And she exhaled and agreed.

This is a woman who suffers, and persists and endures because she has children

depending on her. Paul says that endurance produces character, and I think he means that being in the mode of putting one foot in front of the other makes endurance your default mode. And character produces hope. When you care desperately about the outcome of a situation, *and* you've tried everything you could to get a favorable outcome, and you're out of things to try-- then you realize, "I'm not driving this train. I'm simply not in control. So I need to find a way to BE with what's happening while it unfolds." When you get to the very bottom, what's always there is the same love that brought about the resurrection. There is the same love that looked at us, mess that we are, and said, "This is worth dying for, this is so precious." That's why we have hope in our suffering. It really isn't because our wished-for outcomes are promised, because they're not. It's because God is in this with us, and God always has a next step.

Benjamin Elijah Mays, one of the early leaders of the civil rights movement and a president of Morehouse College for many years, said this: "To be able to stand the troubles of life, one must have a sense of mission and the belief that God sent him or her into the world for a purpose, to do something unique and distinctive; and that if he does not do it, life will be worse off because it was not done."<sup>i</sup> That is the unspoken part of what Paul is saying here. He's saying, first, that you are enough, there is nothing more you must do to justify your existence, because God is fully delighted with you. He's saying, second, that therefore we not only persist but even find hope in our sufferings, because God is with us in them and they have meaning. Unspoken is the thing that Benjamin Mays said, which is that in our sufficiency as we are, and in our troubles, we must be aware that we have a God-given purpose which God needs us to pursue. If we do not, the world will be worse off. Even the drunk on the trolley tracks has worth and a mission, which is why it's still a tragedy if they get run over by a trolley.

I just listened to a podcast<sup>ii</sup> on which Dr. Vivek Murthy was a guest, the Surgeon General of the US. He's recently released a new Surgeon General Advisory calling attention to the public health crisis of loneliness, isolation, and lack of connection in our country.<sup>iii</sup> He points out the physical and mental health damage that loneliness causes. He says loneliness is as dangerous to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. What makes me think of this in connection to the idea that we are all enough *and* that we have a mission is that loneliness is partly a feeling that you're not enough, and that nobody would miss you if you receded from view. Loneliness, in other words, is the opposite of what Paul wants to get across in this reading.

It was a podcast, so I can't tell you who said it or what their exact words were, but one of the guests said that there are measurable benefits to people when a stranger smiles at them or says something pleasantly, like, "The parking lot is crowded today, isn't it?" The benefits increase with more ambitious actions. A young woman in Texas moved to a new city, and her father built her a long table that she put in her front yard. She wanted to get to know the neighbors, so she invited them to a potluck in her yard, and so many people responded that she had to schedule several potlucks.

This congregation has as a core value the intrinsic value of every person exactly as they are. I will tell you that experiencing that on Sunday helps me to carry it into my Mondays and Tuesdays and Wednesdays. The world is hungry for this: for connection, but connection with their real selves, not their curated selves on social media. Part of our mission is to do this: to enact (no need to read Romans out loud) the truth of what Paul says: You are enough just as you are, God is thrilled with you, we see you and how thrilled God is with you, and we're sure you have something important to give the world. Just as Susie said last week, we can't know in

advance what our impact will be, but for sure it's the posture we must take in the world.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, you have welcomed all people into your kingdom. Remove from us the barriers that we build to keep people from you, so that all might live in your grace and peace. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> [https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003e8d/suffering\\_to\\_hope](https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003e8d/suffering_to_hope)

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.talkingfeds.com/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2023/05/03/new-surgeon-general-advisory-raises-alarm-about-devastating-impact-epidemic-loneliness-isolation-united-states.html>