

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, June 14, 2020

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19

*I love the LORD, because he has heard
my voice and my supplications.
Because he inclined his ear to me,
therefore I will call on him as long as I live.*

*What shall I return to the LORD
for all his bounty to me?
I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the LORD,
I will pay my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people.
Precious in the sight of the LORD
is the death of his faithful ones.
O LORD, I am your servant;
I am your servant, the child of your serving-maid.
You have loosed my bonds.
I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice
and call on the name of the LORD.
I will pay my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people,
in the courts of the house of the LORD,
in your midst, O Jerusalem.
Praise the LORD!*

Romans 5:1-8

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. 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.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

Let us pray. God, as we come into this time of worship, as we open ourselves to your word, may Your Spirit speak to each of us. And may all the words we offer be blessed and touched and transformed by Your Spirit into the word of Christ, the living Word, the word of hope and encouragement, the word of courage and liberation, the word of comfort and peace. We ask all of this in the faithful name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

So, when I formulated the worship sheet for this Sunday which was sometime during the summer of last year, I chose as the sermon title, *I Am Tired Of Suffering*. I realized that, for myself at that time, given all that I was dealing with with my spinal cord injury and all of the subsequent neurological issues that affect my legs and now into my arms and my hands, I was just purely sick and tired of suffering. I was so sick of it that when I came to this passage and read it, in a sense, it almost feels like Paul glorifies suffering. As I came to this passage where suffering is sort of the roots that grow in this plant, it begins in suffering and moves toward endurance and character and hope, and finally hope that does not disappoint us, I felt in myself a bit of anger.

If Christ suffered, why must we? If while we were still weak, at the right time, God died for us, if while we were sinners, Christ died for us in order to prove God's love for us, why then must we who believe suffer? And what I realized is that Paul, in his time, suffered tremendously for his faith, having been imprisoned and probably beaten and tortured for what he believed was happening in the world through Jesus Christ. And so, in a sense, I have some compassion towards Paul and his declaration or confession that our hope is grounded at some level in our suffering, in our suffering that reveals the grace in which we stand as we rise. But as I came back to the text this week, that sense of boasting in suffering just continued to rub me the wrong way. And so I looked into the passage, "We boast in our hope of sharing the glory, God and we boast in our suffering" and learned that the word also means rejoice and/or to show joy or delight or in a sense to draw strength from and to not give up. And maybe at some level, that's what Paul is saying to us. Don't give up. But no matter what situation you're facing in your life, don't give up. No matter what challenge lies before you or before us as a community or a nation or in the world, we the people of faith should never give up. Why? Because God has never given up on us. While we were weak, God didn't give up on us. While we were sinners, Christ didn't give up on us. And so maybe this message from the book of Romans is about not giving up on ourselves, on one another, and on God. One of my pet peeves about the new testament, especially in the work of the Epistles, is that sometimes I feel like it's written for those who are just on the cusp of becoming Christians or just after they've said yes to that grace that has been given to them.

In a sense, I feel like scriptures at times are a continual publication of Benjamin Spock's 1945 classic, *Baby and Child Care*. Paul and James, Peter, Timothy, all of these letters are talking to new believers, encouraging them. And I, for one, have often wondered what Paul would have said had he known that Christ was not coming for the next 2000 plus years. Would he have written these things and said these things in the way that he has chosen to do? Would he advocate for suffering that produces endurance and character and then hope knowing that the suffering of the world would be for millennia, or would he, like James, advocate for more action? Would he advocate for us to grow up? Would he advocate for us and say, "You know what? If you have faith but do not have works, can faith alone save you?" If a brother or sister is naked and lacks food and one of you says, "Oh, go in peace, keep warm, eat your filling and you don't give them anything, what good is that?" Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead, says James. A mature faith works itself out, works itself into the world, works itself in our lives and through our lives. And so, in a sense today, I want to try to connect this idea of suffering to hope with the mature understanding that this faith must work itself out in our daily lives. In a sense, I am convinced that that's what's happening in our nation and around the world, with all these protests regarding police brutality and the quest for justice and equality, is that our faith is maturing. Taking the necessary step forward. Moving out of a time of not suffering, but luxury and privilege, towards something which, for many, is uncomfortable. It's called justice. Not "just us", but justice. These protests for Black Lives Matters movements and the call for just policing and just equity, and all of the other calls that are emerging by the voices of those who have been marginalized for way too long, from those who have suffered way too much, from those who have been oppressed and often ignored, or even worse, canceled. Maybe all of these

voices are speaking from a place of a maturing faith, and a place where we who have been privileged by that faith are also able to listen, to be broken open, and to transform and grow, and have our faith that provides us comfort and peace in our daily lives lead us into action on behalf of our neighbors. Today, I want to provide a couple of examples of what that action looks like.

There's been some outcry about a campaign rally that President Trump chose to hold, or designed to hold, this coming 19th of June, this week, in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The date of the rally was originally scheduled for Juneteenth. A holiday that I had heard of, but really didn't know anything about. Juneteenth is a conglomeration of June 19th, which is when, in 1865, Union general, Gordon Granger, read federal orders in Galveston, Texas, that all previously enslaved people in Texas were now free. And although the Emancipation Proclamation had been formally about that, the slaves had been formally freed almost two and a half years earlier, and the American Civil War largely ended in April of that year, Texas was the most remote of the slave states with a low presence of Union troops, and so enforcement of that proclamation had been slow and inconsistent and yet on June 19th, Gordon Granger, in 1865 read that proclamation and freed the slaves, thus the foundation of Juneteenth. And the campaign rally was scheduled for Tulsa on that day. Tulsa-- where in 1921, a mob-- or mobs of angry white people attacked black residents and black businesses in the Greenwood section of Tulsa, Oklahoma, and the section was called Black Wall Street. The riots destroyed 35 square blocks of that neighborhood in what was at the time the wealthiest black community in the United States of America. And so there's been outcry because the president has chosen to do a campaign rally in the city that experienced one of the worst racial massacres and riots by white people against black people in the history of our country on the day that marks the freedom of those who were enslaved. Bowing to that pressure the campaign rally has been rescheduled for the day after. I myself wonder, is that enough?

In a sense those that are speaking up about this event are allowing their faith to take action-- their voices to be heard-- demanding to be heard and saying, "Enough is enough." But as we hear the voices of privilege and supremacy, they are still at times louder than the voices that call for justice, equity, and peace. For many of us when we read scripture, especially the parts of our faith story from Genesis, Exodus and Deuteronomy, we think of slavery as that which happened a long, long, long time ago-- 4,000 years ago or longer when the people of God were carted off to Egypt and held in bondage as slaves.

That understanding of slavery that had happened in biblical times makes us a little naive about the history of slavery in our own country. I didn't know anything about Juneteenth before earlier this week and I'm not sure I'd ever heard of the Tulsa Race Riots. I realized this week the privilege of my heritage and my upbringing, my lineage. But while my great-grandfather came over as a 13-year-old immigrant boy by himself to this country, my roots are sown in freedom, not in slavery, not in oppression, not in being thought of as property for someone else. I was stunned, when watching the eulogy for George Floyd by the Reverend Al Sharpton, that the reverend shared the following story:

In 2007, the New York Post asked if they could look into Reverend Sharpton's genealogy, and he agreed. Working with the folks at Ancestry.com and other scholars, it was learned that Reverend Sharpton's ancestors were slaves that were once owned by relatives of the late Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, one of the leading proponents of segregation throughout most, if not all, of his life. Reverend Sharpton shared the story about attending-- or going to a church where there were graves, and there were tombstones of his ancestors. He went into the churchyard and saw tombstones for Thurmonds and Sharptons next to one another, and he said, "Oh, are these my people?" And someone said, "No. All the slaves are buried in the field over there with little stones marking their graves. These are the graves of the white folks."

It was in that moment that the weight of Mr. Sharpton's name came to him in full force, that Sharpton wasn't his name. It was the name of the family that owned his great-grandfather and great-grandmother because, on the eve of the civil war in segregated Florida, a white man named Sharpton died at the age of 40, and he was in debt. And so, his father-in-law gave to his surviving wife, Julia Thurmond Sharpton, four slaves, two adults and two children, who would work on behalf of Miss Sharpton in order to pay off the debt of her late husband. One of these folks was Al Sharpton's grandfather.

[silence]

So when we think about slavery being that which is something planted in ancient history or even in the history of the founding of this great nation that we love and belong to, we need to realize that for many black Americans, slavery is not an ancient story, it is a “today” story that touches their daily lives. And in another story similar to Al Sharpton's, the comedian Dave Chappelle put a special on Netflix entitled 8:46 for the 8 minutes and 46 seconds that the police officer knelt on George Floyd's neck. Mr. Chappelle is one of the most successful comedians in the world, a black man who is gritty, honest, and at times, quite vulgar. There wasn't a ton of comedy in this special, instead, there was anguish and honesty. For me, there was a glimpse inside the living world of someone who's a contemporary. During the special, Dave Chappelle tells the story about his great-grandfather, who led a black delegation to meet with President Woodrow Wilson following the lynching of a black man in South Carolina over a \$30 dispute at a grain elevator. The delegation was led by an AME bishop, William David Chappelle. He says, "This is where I get my name. He was my great-grandfather who was a slave when he was born."

[silence]

These things are not old history or ancient from the pages of some dusty history book. These things are now, from many of our neighbors who are out protesting and asking for justice, demanding it. Chappelle shares that this grandfather's wife was the woman that his father called out to on his deathbed when asked to see his mother. This grandmother was also born a slave. Chappelle goes on to address some of the pushback that he and other comedians or people of fame have received. And he says that, "Nobody needs to hear what I have to say because the streets are speaking for themselves, whether I'm dead or alive, the streets will speak. I trust you guys. I love you guys. We'll keep this space open. This is the last stronghold for civil discourse." In sometimes profane and vulgar language, Dave Chappelle speaks honesty about how close and how painful the history of slavery is to him and to many others in the black community. And I share all of these stories and my sense of the reading from Romans with a call for all of us to stop being naive, to stop being romantic, to stop thinking that stories of slavery come from Scripture only and that they happened so long ago, but to realize that the suffering that we are seeing and we are a part of is suffering that is founded in slavery, and that it's time for all of us to say that, "Enough is enough." It's time for all of us to embrace the suffering of our neighbors, to persevere in that suffering, to let it endure, to let it grow, to let it mature so that we can all live in freedom and justice and peace. Faith without works is dead. Let us all make sure that we keep our faith alive. Amen.