

# IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, May 14, 2023

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## Romans 5:1-5

I neglected to mention that we were also grateful to have John Pate with us as well to help lead in the baptism, one of the grandfathers of little Blythe. We're grateful.

Friends, this day, as Jeanene mentioned to our kids just a little bit ago, we're going to continue in Paul's letter to the church in Rome. We're going to be in the fifth chapter. We're going to read together beginning in the first verse, so you can grab one of your blue Pew Bibles and follow along with us—Romans, chapter 5, verses one through five.

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 suffering, 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.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So it was a busy day here yesterday at the church. We celebrated Betty Jack's life together in this space, and there were a lot of things going on, other activities that were important to the life and ministries of Idlewild. My assistant, Mary Margaret, had been out late in the week, and so she and I were kind of catching up on all the duties that we needed to get done before today. Some of y'all might receive an email promptly at 6 a.m on Sunday mornings. Who receives that email? Keep your hands raised if you read that email in its entirety. We just, okay all right, I guess they don't lie in church, but I'm grateful that y'all read it. That's great. That's something I put together usually on Saturdays. That's how that usually goes, and yesterday I just threw a little piece in there at the beginning of the second paragraph that was acknowledging Mother's Day and how today we celebrate Mother's Day; and so I asked Mary Margaret, I said, "Do you think that piece works? Right, does that work?" And she said, "Well, I haven't read the full text of the scripture, but if you're trying to tie it to Mother's Day, I can't think of a more apt description of motherhood than suffering, endurance, character, and hope." She said, "That is what it's like to be a mother, more often than not"

There's a lot that we can tease from this text this morning. We're going to unpack it in a couple of different ways, but I think it's important for us to acknowledge on the front end here the problem of the text. And the problem is that if we were just to make a cursory reading of Romans, if we were just to pluck out these five verses, we might imagine that Paul is doing his best to minimize suffering. He moves too quickly past it in this text, just really two and a half verses that he devotes to suffering. He speaks of boasting and being able to share the glory of God, and then he

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says in verse 3, “And not only that but we also boast in our suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.” He moves too quickly, as if it were that suffering, very real suffering that we experience personally and communally is something that we can move through in a couple verses, as if a cancer diagnosis or a separation in one's marriage, as if the loss of a parent or the estrangement from a child were something that we could move through quickly. If we were just to read it in passing, we might think that Paul moves too rapidly from suffering to hope.

And yet there is something, if you have endured suffering of any kind, and many of us have, if you've endured suffering of any kind, then there's still something, even with a quick reading of the text, that somehow rings true. There's something in this that we know intuitively to be accurate. A friend of mine was in seminary, and she was reflecting upon the difficulty of her childhood. It kept coming up in the teachings that she would share with her classmates in the preaching class that we had. She reminded me this week that at one point during the semester a professor pulled her aside and said, “It's quite evident that you are wrestling with the difficulty of your childhood, alcoholic parents, and then being on your own at the age of 13. I can't tell you how to navigate that difficulty; but what I can tell you is that your childhood, however difficult it was, is going to make you a better pastor to people in the real world. The suffering that you experienced as a child will make you, as Paul says in scripture, “Should you choose it, it will make you better at weeping with those who weep and rejoicing with those who rejoice.”

The pastor and teacher there didn't minimize the suffering, but gave the suffering some type of purpose, some type of direction. That's why I think it's perhaps important for us to clarify the text this morning a little bit by saying that Paul is not attempting in this text to describe the linear progression of suffering—that first you suffer, and then you learn endurance, and at some point that becomes character, and at some point that character produces hope. That's not what he's doing. Instead, I would posit to you this day that Paul is describing a mindset of sorts, actually. Paul is describing a way in which we might stand back from our suffering and view it and draw meaning from it, that we might stand back from difficulty whether that be personal or communal and have a different posture towards it. He is describing a way in which we all actually might be empowered even in our suffering.

Jonathan Haidt published research just a little while ago showing that there are significantly higher cases of mental illness, both self-reported and measured by hospital intakes, amongst those who have what they describe as an external locus of control. Y'all probably have heard that phrase before, locus of control, right? His research is speaking directly to progressives as he describes it, but it, really I think, can apply to anyone.

Haidt doesn't question the existence of what he describes as evil external systems of suffering. You might call those systems patriarchy or systemic racism or sexism or some other “ism.” He's not debating their existence and their power in the world. Those are real. But he does argue that when a person has internalized hopelessness and they attribute it to external systems, it removes

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one's internal locus of control. The research suggests that that leads to a loss of mental health. It's this nasty mix of catastrophic thinking and over-identifying as victim that combines to instill an unconscious position of what he describes as powerlessness.

Haidt tries to explain by quoting journalist Jill Filipovic. "Just about everything researchers understand about resilience and mental well-being suggests that people who feel like they are the chief architects of their own life, to mix metaphors that they captain their own ship, not that they are simply being tossed around by an uncontrollable ocean, that those folks are vastly better off than people whose default position is victimization or hurt or a sense that life simply happens to them and they have no control over their response." That's the key there, not a diminishing of the truth and reality of suffering that we have very little control over experiencing, but that last word— response.

There's this psychological construct with a long history of research and measurement that we call locus of control. It was first laid out by Julian Rotter in the 1950s.

Those who have an internal locus of control—they feel as if they have the power to choose a course of action and make it happen; while other people who have an external locus of control—they have little sense of agency. They believe that strong forces and agents outside of themselves will determine what happens to them. And more than 60 years of research shows that people with an internal locus of control seem to be happier and even achieve more. People with an external locus of control are more passive and more likely to experience depression.

So if we were to re-read the text from Romans through that lens, maybe Paul is inviting the community of the early Christians in Rome to reposition their locus of control so that their locus of control becomes internal.

Or as Laura Vanderkam would put it, "Believing that your actions matter is how the human mind learns hope." And so maybe Paul is saying you have to understand that you have agency in this life and in this world. Now as people of faith we do divert from Filipovic in one way. We don't actually claim that we are the chief architects of our lives. We claim that God is indeed that architect. What we get to be are co-laborers in the work of building.

God designs it and works through it, and we labor with the spirit of God to bring it into being.

Then it's not some shallow movement from suffering to hope. Instead, it's the progression that we might be able to work through in claiming the ways in which we respond to suffering. In that way then Paul isn't an apostle or a pastor or a prophet in this text; he's a coach. He's the one at halftime addressing the team saying, "I know it's tough out there. They are bigger than you, more difficult to defend than you expected; they shoot better than you do; they move more quickly than you do; but you're the ones that are on the court." Paul believed that every Christian community, every Christian even, would take part in the life of Christ, including the suffering of

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Christ. Paul believed that as Jesus suffered so would we, and so he's coaching them up here. He can't stop their suffering, but he can invite them to choose a different response.

Maybe y'all paid attention about a year and a couple months ago to our very own Geoff Calkins. He had a viral moment with the coach of the Memphis Tiger basketball team, Penny Hardaway. He asked Penny after a particularly difficult loss, he said, "Penny, have you ever lost faith that you can get this done?"

Penny paused and then went into about a minute and a half, went into a diatribe of sorts to correct Geoff's line of thinking and questioning. It fostered a number of different outlets picking it up, millions of different views on the internet. I watched it again this week and listened to Geoff's question again, and I found myself asking Penny to say yes, to answer the question as so many of us who have experienced difficulty in our lives would answer the questions when we were asked have you ever thought about giving up? "Absolutely, I have. Am I worried if I can get through the suffering? You bet!" All of us who have truly experienced it have questioned our ability to move through it. We are human. If you've suffered in any way, then you have felt the desire to give up. And yet what Paul is saying is that we can't stop the suffering, but what we can do is choose the way in which we respond.

And what he describes, what he describes is a way of faithfully staying in it. What he describes is a way of positioning ourselves over and against the suffering of our...our personal lives but also of our community, and standing back from it and imagining that over time the suffering might indeed produce something that we might come to know as endurance.

And then if we stay in it long enough, however difficult it might be, that endurance might produce something else within us that we might over time come to call character. And if we let that ruminate long enough, what that might produce for us is a trust and a belief that our actions matter. And if we listen to Laura Vanderkam, then we would believe that that is what produces hope.

And that over and against all the other sufferings of the world, if we're looking for something that will not disappoint us, it will be the hope that is founded in Jesus Christ—hope that can help us to move through even the most difficult of situations.

If we were just to have a cursory reading of this passage from Romans, we might be tempted to think that Paul's talking to us personally and he's addressing whatever suffering each of us might be experiencing individually; but that's not what he's doing here. Paul is addressing a community of people. It's not a letter to the Christian in Rome; it is a letter to the Romans, the early Christians in Rome. What Paul knew was that they were a community bound to each other, and so when Paul speaks of this movement from suffering all the way to hope, what he is assuming is that they will be committed to moving through this together as a community, that they will surround themselves with people who will pray for them, sit with them in quiet, cry with them, someone who will be there to listen when they really need a listening ear.

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And maybe that's the critical part of this.

Maybe the movement from suffering to hope isn't ever supposed to take place within just our personal journeys. Maybe it's always supposed to take place within community. So you being here then this morning or you watching online with other Christians in that space, maybe that... maybe that is the first step towards living into Paul's vision of what this is supposed to look like. Here's what Paul doesn't know about this community. He doesn't know the suffering that they are going to endure—personal or communal, and so I can't speak to that to you this morning either. What difficulty or resistance is going to meet you in the world? Maybe in your marriage, maybe in your parenting, maybe it will be loneliness, maybe it will be disease. I'm not sure what it is.

But what it seems to be that Paul is trying to proclaim to us today is not some platitude to help us get through, but to give us the most honest good news that he could share with us. It is going to be incredibly difficult, and your only decision in this is not the level of difficulty but your response to it. So I invite you with the spirit of God to imagine that whatever current suffering you might be enduring is going to produce in you a strength that you didn't think you had; and if you lay into that strength, if you fall into it over and over again, over time it's going to shape who you understand yourself to be. We might call it character. And if you live into that over and over and over again, what you're going to realize is actually there is hope for you, and for the community, for our world. I'm not sure what Paul means by boasting in our suffering, but if he means that that truth is worth sharing with someone, I can get on board. I can get on board with the belief and the trust that in community we can suffer and move through that suffering together, that we can give it purpose, we can stand outside of it. Here's what I imagine. Perhaps you are the one who suffers this day, or perhaps God might cross your path with someone in deep need this week, and I wonder what it might look like to sit with them in the midst of difficulty, to pray with them or cry with them or even be silent with them, but to hold hope where they cannot quite yet that whatever it is they are navigating, God is there.

Maybe that's something we're sharing with people. Maybe that's what Paul meant.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.