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That'll Be the Day!

Romans 8:18-27

Cyndi and I just returned from a few days in the desert down near Palm Springs. After weeks of hacking away, it was a wonderful gift to take a breath of warm, dry air. Speaking of breath... (how's this for a transition)... the ancient Greek word for breath... is Pneuma. As in pneumonia. As in I began to wonder if I had it. But pneuma ALSO has another meaning: spirit! And we have paused in the 8th chapter of Romans to breathe deeply of the Holy Spirit. This is the Holy Spirit chapter. 21 times the Spirit appears in this chapter, more than any other in the New Testament. After the hard theological work of the first seven chapters... dealing with topics such as sin and law and the flesh and justification... isn't it wonderful to pause and breathe deeply of the Holy Spirit?

We Christians have the Spirit of Jesus... the same Spirit that raised him from the dead... living inside of us! And Romans 8 takes us on a deep dive into what that means. Last week Pastor Larry shared a powerful and deeply personal reflection on what it means that God has adopted us to be his own children. Because of the Spirit alive in us we are able to cry out to God, "Abba, Father, daddy."

But not only are we God's children, verse 17 reveals THIS amazing truth: "...if we are children, then heirs---heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ..." Imagine that! We aren't just second-class stepchildren in God's family. We are joint heirs with Jesus! Everything he has coming to him as the faithful son of the Father... every spiritual and eternal legacy that is his due... we share! How gracious is that! Not only has Jesus saved us, he said to God, "Dad... I want you to write them into the will! I want them to share equally in all the good things that you have set aside for me."

Joint-heirs with Jesus! That's amazing. But there IS one little stipulation. Fine print, if you will. The very last part of verse 17. Paul writes that we are "fellow heirs of Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him." Wait a second. "...provided we suffer with him?" Who said anything about suffering? Well... Paul is about to say a lot about this topic. It may be a subject we'd rather avoid... but as we discover, life in the Spirit does not mean we avoid suffering; it means we redeem it. 8:18-25

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

As I said, Cyndi and I really enjoyed our drying-out time in the desert. The Coachella Valley is a beautiful and prosperous place. Gated communities, impressive cars...I saw a LOT of Bentleys and a LOT of Teslas...and, perhaps the greatest sign of a utopian society: 143 golf courses!

But there were other things. Entire lanes of huge parking lots set aside for disabled parking—a sea of blue paint! A traffic jam of walkers being pushed around in the grocery stores. Countless health care facilities...endless advertisements for specialists in joint repair. There were many signs to indicate that, behind the prosperity and the beauty of that community, there is a lot of suffering. And of course, that's just the physical suffering that is more easily spotted. What you can't see, but you know it's there, is the relational and emotional and spiritual suffering that every human being faces at some time or another.

According to countless surveys, one of the greatest obstacles to religious faith is suffering. And EVERY religion offers a different response. Hinduism explains suffering through Karma: since we are trapped in a cycle of reincarnation, whatever we are suffering now is punishment for bad behavior in a previous life. Suffering is payback. Nihilism would say that because life has no meaning, suffering has no meaning; it just is. Suffering is pointless. Islam asserts the sovereignty of Allah. Suffering is God's will. Buddhism would argue that, since all matter is illusory...a delusion... so is pain and suffering. Suffering is all in your mind.

Well...what does Christianity say about suffering? How should we who have the Spirit of Christ living within us deal with suffering? Paul makes three points: We must expect it, we will exchange it, and we can embrace it.

First, we must expect it. Suffering is a part of this life. It is a result of sin. When Adam and Eve, disobeyed God and introduced sin into the world, suffering and pain were part of the consequences. And it isn't just human beings that suffer as a result. All of creation is paying a price for OUR sinful rebellion. We know that Adam and Eve suffered painful consequences as a result of their disobedience. God pronounced a curse upon them that included getting kicked out of paradise. But did you recall that God's curse ALSO fell upon the earth...the ground...upon ALL of creation? That's why Paul says in this passage that creation GROANS while it waits for human beings to get their act together...or more accurately...for God to get our act together!

In the meantime, suffering is inevitable. You can expect it...at some point, it will come. Those pastors who preach that pain and loss and suffering are due to a lack of faith... they are just heretics. Plain and simple. Did Paul lack faith? In 2 Corinthians 11 Paul offers a litany of his own sufferings as an apostle. "[I experienced] imprisonments, with countless beatings, and [was] often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure."

Paul's whole life was marked by suffering. Did Jesus lack faith? Last Wednesday was Ash Wednesday and we entered into the season of Lent when we remember the sufferings of Christ. The very gospel we proclaim...a gospel of grace and forgiveness and redemption...is built upon the foundation of a God who became a man and endured suffering and death for our sake. Go back to verse 17 one more time. Paul promises that we will be adopted as joint heirs with Jesus "provided we suffer with him."

Part of the way that God sanctifies us...part of the way that God prepares us for eternity ...is through our suffering. This may not be what we want to hear. It might not be the way we'd do it if were up to us. But it's not. Suffering is inevitable. We should expect it. It's part of the brokenness of creation. That is a clear and, for most of us, hard word to hear. But Paul isn't done. In verse 18 he puts suffering in perspective:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

There's that word "glory" again. We've talked about it many times. The perfect, brilliant, overwhelming, awesome experience of the presence of God. That's glory. Paul doesn't deny that our sufferings are real. He just says that they will shrivel into insignificance in comparison to what awaits us. And to illustrate the point, he uses a very familiar image: labor pains!

If I figured out anything standing next to Cyndi's birthing bed, it was that labor is.... unpleasant. I made the mistake of leaning down within her grasp while she was experiencing a particularly potent contraction. She reached out and grabbed my ear and began to pull on it. To this day, you will notice that my right ear is longer than my left. I can say that, quite literally, I entered into her pain. But the look on her face as she held our newborn Rachel told me that all she had endured...the hours of painful contractions ...were forgotten in that moment. They were nothing compared to the glory of holding our child. As far as I was considered, we were ready to have another! No problem!

The hymn "The Old Rugged Cross" has this line: "I will cling to the old rugged cross and exchange it one day for a crown." The incredible claim of the Christian faith is that God uses suffering to redeem us and transform us...and fit us for heaven. Paul will touch on this idea later in this chapter when we are reminded that "...all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose." It really says something about the power and the sovereignty of our God that he can turn even that which is most painful in our lives into a tool by which he makes us more and more like his own Son...our fellow heir!

But if this is true...if suffering is one of God's tools to prepare us for eternity... how then do WE deal with it? What do we do with suffering? Paul would say, "Embrace it!" Speaking of our journey through suffering into glory, Paul says in verse 27: "... we wait for it with patience." Do you see that word "patience?" You've seen it before. Hupomone! Enduring courage. "Hang-in-there baby" courage. The belief that "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." IF it is true that God uses suffering to conform us to the image of his son...if it is true that God uses suffering to shape us into his children, ready for a glorious eternity with him... then the best thing we can do is embrace that suffering. We face it. We move toward it. We say, "I hate what I'm feeling right now. I wish I weren't going through this. But since I am...and since by faith I believe God will use even this painful experience to draw me closer to him...then let's get on with it. The sooner, the better."

I'm not talking about a phony, "everything's all right" pretense. I'm not talking about putting a plastic smile on your face and speaking religious platitudes. All you have to do is read the psalms and discover that David's prayers in his time of suffering were raw and real and at times...almost disrespectful to God. "WHERE ARE YOU God? Why won't you fix this? Why won't you do something about this? Why are the bad guys winning?" Have you ever prayed those prayers? Yet every time David returned to the same place. "Nevertheless, ... not matter how bad things seem to be...I trust you, God. You are good. I believe you will bring me through; I believe you will bring me to blessing." Our instinct is to flee suffering; to push it away. But Paul would say, "Embrace it!"

Candidly, I suffered as I wrote this sermon. I don't feel very qualified to speak to this very tender issue...and of course, like all of you, I don't WANT to feel qualified. I don't feel like I've suffered very much. I fell on my head on an ice rink and nearly died...but I didn't suffer. My family did, but I didn't. My lifelong struggle with depression might qualify. And I went through a seven-year lawsuit that was very hard. Seven years is a long time and to this day, honestly, I still don't see the good that came out of it. I suppose these things represent suffering. But when I look at what others experience, my "suffering" seems as nothing... and I feel unworthy to speak to it.

I think of those who are fighting cancer. I think of those who have been betrayed by their spouse. I think of those whose children are sick...or worse, those who lost a child. We are led in worship every weekend by brothers and sisters who have suffered terrific loss. Margie and Dave Dickerson lost their beloved Maari at the age of 10. James and April Roberson lost Kylee at the age of 7. Dave Thomas lost his beloved wife, Malinda, not long ago. I mention this with their permission, of course. I can't even imagine the pain they have experienced...and yet, they continue to sing. And they help us sing.

But they... and others of you who have suffered similarly...might well say, "You really don't know what you are talking about." And to that I would agree. I have not faced what many of you have faced. And yet, I stand by my words. Embrace your suffering.

Otherwise, what is your option? Numb your suffering with alcohol or drugs or food or spending? Deny your suffering; bury it deep inside of yourself where it will fester and one day explode? Curse your suffering and the God who has disappointed you? That's what others do with suffering. But Jesus calls us to something different. He calls us to join him in Gethsemane even as we beg God to take away what he still chooses to give. He calls us to join him on Calvary where he died an apparent criminal and loser... only to be raised to incomparable glory.

If we do NOT believe that God can take even pain and suffering and redeem it...use it to shape us and prepare us for glory...then we are saying that suffering is meaningless. How do you speak into the lives of the 17 families whose loved ones were brutally cut down in Florida? To speak words of hope or perseverance or redemption could come across as pat or patronizing. But if we don't this passage...then these deaths are utterly meaningless. And if Paul is saying anything, he is saying that the sufferings of God's children are never meaningless; never wasted! He echoes the words of Psalm 56:8 where David, in a time of suffering, wrote: You have kept count of my tossings [in bed]; [you have] put my tears in your bottle.

Our suffering is precious to God. Every tear shed over the loss of a child, God has collected and saved. I imagine a huge heavenly warehouse filled with billions of crystal carafes, each one of them containing the salty evidence of a broken heart. Our suffering is precious to God...so much so that he entered into it! God may not choose to tell us WHY we suffer...but he declared his compassion for us by entering right into that human suffering. He sent his son, Jesus, who experienced the depth of human pain and betrayal and abuse. And God the Heavenly Father entered into our suffering too by experiencing the death of HIS only child. No other religion...no other irreligion... can make that claim. GOD embraced our suffering so that we might experience his glory.

John Stott wrote in his Romans commentary, "Some Christians grin too much and groan too little because they have no place in their theology for pain." For those of you who are suffering right now...there is a place for that pain. This church is a place where we tell the truth about suffering. That it is real. That it is raw. That it is often inexplicable...and yet that we have a God who is so great that he can turn our mourning into dancing; that he can redeem our deepest pain and use it to prepare us for a glorious eternity that we cannot even imagine. What a day that will be!