

Sermon The Heart of the Matter Week 3 November 30, 2016

Therefore, since we have been made righteous through God's faithfulness, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We have access by faith into this grace in which we stand through Him, and we boast in the hope of God's glory. But not only that! We even take pride in our problems, because we know that trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. This hope doesn't put us to shame, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. Romans 5:1-5

One hundred and fifty-five years ago last Sunday, November 13, 1861, a letter was written to the Secretary of the United States Treasury from a pastor. This was the beginning of the American Civil War, in which 620,000 Americans were killed. The letter to the Treasury Secretary read: *"Dear Sir: You are about to submit your annual report to the Congress respecting the affairs of the national finances. One fact touching our currency has hitherto been seriously overlooked. I mean the recognition of the Almighty God in some form on our coins. What if our Republic were not shattered beyond reconstruction? Would not succeeding centuries rightly reason that we were a heathen nation? What I propose is that instead of the goddess of liberty on our coins... the words GOD, LIBERTY, and LAW. This would make a beautiful coin... and would relieve us from the ignominy of heathenism... and would place us openly under the Divine protection. [Speaking for myself] I have felt our national shame in disowning God as not the least of our present national disasters."* An interesting letter and an interesting belief, that during this war between America's people, stamping God's name on money, would provide proof that we were a Christian nation.

Last Thursday night our dog Zelda and I walked downtown, and at the corner of Mt. Diablo Blvd. and Dewing, there's a men's clothing store with a shattered plate-glass window. I was told that after the November 8th election there was a riot and some vandalism downtown. The shattered window is safety glass so it stands intact but in a mosaic of thousands of pieces. That window is how I've been feeling; any how many say they have been feeling. Even before the election, there was a sense of unease and division in our country. And it reminds me of the unease and division happening in the church. We seem to come to a point that we can't cross over, and a line is drawn in the sand. And we take aim at each other, to shoot down the other side. We say (at least to ourselves we say) to those whose patriotism or theology is different than ours, "I'm right and you're very wrong. Or I'm a Christian you're a heathen. Or I'm better (or smarter, or holier) and you're... deplorable." The unkindness and intolerance in our country and in the church feels like a national disaster... threatening to shatter us into a mosaic of thousands of pieces of glass.

In his letter to the Church in Rome, the Apostle Paul reminds us (again!) of how counterculture Christianity is. We come to church, in part, to learn this different way of thinking and living and being, because the way of the world, or as Paul referred to it, "the flesh" or the "natural man" (our ego) hasn't worked, and we're a fractured people. Paul's lesson for us is about how to respond to trouble, to frustration, to harassment, to

people who vote and worship and believe differently than we do... to anything that shatters our well-being.

Paul says first and most importantly, that we have peace with God because of the relationship - that is, the hope, and confidence we have - in Jesus Christ. So at the very least, when your back is against the wall, or the rug has been pulled out from under you, you can be confident that God holds the world, and all of us, in God's care. I saw a wooden sign in a shop that said, "I don't want to give away the ending... but everything turns out all right." Our ultimate assurance and peace is that because God holds us, and all the world, with an inexhaustible love, everything will be redeemed. So whatever shatters our peace, ultimately we rest in God.

Keeping your relationship with Jesus healthy and alive is crucial to having peace. Prayer - praise, requests, complaints, singing, listening in silence - is a way to tend that relationship. Reading about Jesus, especially the gospels, tends that relationship. Loving all kinds of people whether they deserve it or not (just as Jesus loves you and me) tends that relationship. Forgiving others, for no other reason than because God has and does forgive all your sins and shortcomings, tends that relationship. Be intentional about tending your relationship with Jesus, because that's where we have peace.

But sometimes our peace is shattered, and disaster happens. Paul tells us, in these times, we grow. One of my favorite quotes from the late humorist Erma Bombeck, was, "Lord, please send me a blessing that's not disguised." That's growth... a difficult, often painful, and disguised blessing. Paul takes us step-by-step through this Christian process of growing, which is called sanctification. Sanctification means that God loves you just exactly the way you are... but God loves you too much to leave you there. If you follow Jesus Christ, you're going to grow.

Paul says that when we suffer we remember (actually he says that we rejoice) but I think, rather, that it makes us mindful... that suffering produces endurance. The Message translation tells us, "Troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and that... keeps us alert for whatever God will do next." When your peace is shattered, be mindful that suffering can produce patience in you. (And just a caveat here that it's never okay to tell someone suffering that it's a lesson sent from God to teach them patience.)

Paul says that patience (the first lesson of suffering) produces character - it builds endurance, and strength, and courage in us. With patience comes endurance; and our ability to cope with trouble, stress, anger, and fear grows, and our ability to trust God in all circumstances grows. Endurance produces faith that God's Spirit has made a home in us and is transforming us... and that makes hope blossom in us. And hope, Paul says, never disappoints us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts. God's love has made a home in us and is transforming our hearts, our minds, and how we live with each other. Again, from The Message translation, Paul's letter ends, "In alert expectancy such as this, we're never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary - we can't round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!"

When we suffer, when our peace is shattered, when the way forward is dark... God is working in us, growing in us patience, and endurance, and character, and hope. God's love is pouring into our hearts... and we may find there aren't enough containers to hold all the love.

This month is the Finance Campaign, and the theme and the image are a strong heartbeat. The graphic is an EKG in the middle of page 4... a heart that's beating with love. Today we'll dedicate our financial pledges for 2017. A pledge is a best-guess, and an intention, of what we'll give to support the ministries of the church in the coming year. It's not written in stone, so you can give more if you find you're able, or less, if you need to. Our prayer as we dedicate our pledges is that God will use this money to transform lives. What we all want, regardless of how we worship, or vote, or believe, is to love and to be loved. We're here to grow in the ways of love; for God's love to make us whole; and because we want to help heal the world with love.

We come to church (and I believe this even though I've heard many reasons people come to church... our friends are here, it's what we've always done, we like the Choir director... and my favorite, "the best looking girls are in the Methodist youth group.") But truly, we come to church because God is working in us, growing us, and transforming us. We come to church because we yearn to learn a new way to live... not shattered lives of suspicion and division but lives of love, and reconciliation, and peace. We come to church to be transformed by love so that we can take God's love into all the world.

We have a November verse for the soul, which is at the top of page 4 of the bulletin. Let's say it together, starting with the words, "O Lord." "O Lord, I will praise You with all my heart and tell everyone about the marvelous things You do."

I wonder as we sit for a moment of reflective silence, if you might begin a list of the marvelous ways God has loved you... and if you might praise God with all your heart... and if you might tell someone about the marvelous ways God's love is changing and refining and blessing you. Once more, let's say our verse for the soul: "O Lord, I will praise You with all my heart and tell everyone about the marvelous things You do." Amen.