

Full Hearts
Romans 5: 1-5
Leah Hrachovec

Some time ago, I was sitting at a coffee shop across from a woman who had been worshiping with us for a while. We were just starting to get to know each other, and it seemed as though we were both relieved to be getting time together that was more than a moment at the back door of the sanctuary. We talked about family, her work, past church experiences she had had, and how she found us. I said, "Tell me what you are most interested in exploring. We'd love to get you involved, connected somewhere in the church. Do you like to sing? Or maybe you're looking for a fellowship group? We also have a really great series starting next week for adults." She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. I said, "Tell me what you're looking for and I'll do my best to help." After a long look and pause, she said, "I am looking for peace."

Yes, yes, of course. We have that, too. But it's not so easy, is it? It's not on a nice, neat, searchable, ministry-team run schedule all the time. But today, through the Apostle Paul, God has a word of peace for us today, and so much more. Paul plainly tells us, "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." We have this peace. In Christ, we are no longer at odds with God, no longer out of God's love and favor and promise, if we were or we even thought we were.

Paul doesn't stop there. He builds on: because of this peace, we have *grace* to stand, and so we boast in our *hope* of sharing the *glory* of God. Peace, grace, hope, glory. These are some words that we use and print on Christmas cards and put on signs for the kitchen walls but how are they really available, how do we live them together.

I don't know about you, but these last two years have been overly full of things that do not give peace, or hope. Some inglorious things, indeed. Pandemic. Isolation, illness, impossible decisions of parenting, some of us have lost loved ones and experienced grief so strange with gatherings put off or canceled. Then the unsettling extreme weather and wondering if these are the patterns for our planet to come. Supply chain woes. The attack on Ukrainian people and land, and then too many attacks too many places: at the grocery store, at the school, on South Street, at the doctor's office.

I'm looking for peace, she said.

The incredible thing about life together, when we are the body of Christ together, when we are the church together, is that this peace that God promises, this grace that God gives us, this hope of sharing a moment of glory, of the presence of God's own self does not require that we turn our back on the woes of the world. Faith also does not

ask that we shove aside our own personal problems or weakness and worries in order to receive this promised peace.

The believers to whom Paul writes still experienced the realities of being a human being in the world. Trusting in Christ did not make the early believers immune from persecution-rather more vulnerable to it. They also experienced the ordinary grief of life: the death of loved ones, illnesses and injuries, questions of daily bread, resisting temptations and making those daily decisions of faith that must have seemed strange to their relatives and neighbors.

If Paul were to simply pass out peace, and hope, and glory like they were trading cards in the lunchroom, they and we might read his words and conclude, "He just doesn't know what we are facing," and move on. Paul does not ignore or turn his back on suffering, quite the opposite. Paul wrote to the Romans toward the end of his life, a life in which he has had his own share of sufferings. Paul experienced skepticism from Jerusalem as he was not one of the original disciples, he lived with memories of his former life of persecuting and overseeing the execution of Christ followers. He endured numerous beatings at the hands of Roman authorities, and was imprisoned at least three times. And he suffered from a vague ongoing affliction, what he calls "a thorn in my flesh" (2 Cor 12:7).

Yet, he calls us to boast in our hope, and also boast in our sufferings. Boasting in our sufferings sounds like a strange verb, though. Some translators have preferred "rejoicing in our sufferings." I wonder if Paul means that we can lose the shame of our sufferings. One of our sister congregations, Oakhurst Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, modeled ways to do that. I served one summer as a seminary intern there, and witnessed in wonder each week at how sometimes the prayers of the people were even longer than the sermon time. It was an incredibly important part of the service, as Pastor Nibs Stroupe invited people to share their joys and their sufferings to be lifted up together in prayer. I was in awe of the ways that the congregation encouraged one another to share their sufferings. Not just their acceptable sufferings, but the whole of life: A woman invited us into the room with her father who was dying of AIDS. We prayed weekly with a member who was often back to day one or day three of sobriety. A multiracial and multinational congregation, members shared honestly their struggles with worshipping with people with a skin color different than their own, expressing the joy and frustration of life held together in Christ. Above all, they lived in hope for one another and the world.

Paul does not say that we boast, or rejoice, because of our sufferings. Instead, Paul asks us to think about the possibility that we can rejoice *in the midst of* our sufferings. This is more than a grin-and-bear-it admonition. Paul is making the case that instead of viewing our afflictions as something we just have to get through, or something we deserve because of something we did, or a test from God, or even worse, a punishment from God, we can instead trust in the transfiguring power of God's grace, a grace that covers and touches everything including the worst of our lives. In God's hands, even our suffering is not a waste.

Do we wish for suffering, seek it out, or look for more? I don't know about you, but I don't. But in God's hands, nothing is wasted. We have hope because of the absolute goodness and grace of God, and we also understand that through Christ, that chain reaction of suffering producing endurance, and endurance producing character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because of God's love poured into our hearts all along the way. Even our worst experiences have within them the possibility of transformation, of a new way of knowing Christ and sharing hope in the midst of all things.

A recent headline grabbed my attention, "Your Kids are Not Doomed" by Ezra Klein, writing an Opinion piece for the NYT. Klein tackles a sentiment that is murmured at gatherings of adults who are concerned that the future is concerning indeed. Have we hit a peak, in the U.S. and globally, in quality of life. There is an anxiety, maybe you share it too, that the next generation faces a future that will not be as bright and full of possibilities as we once thought our own would be.

Klein's article argues against this doomed-future scenario. He puts into perspective the seriousness of our past and present decisions on the health of the planet and the health of human beings, without trivializing the great challenges we as human beings face, and particularly those communities who are already most vulnerable to environmental impacts because they live with far less and have fewer defenses to start. Klein makes the case that we cannot simply stop having children as though it is a zero-sum game, as though our family decisions will have more impact than more positive collective actions. Though he does not mention faith particularly, he does declare that we as a society must embrace the possibility of not just human survival but also learn and teach how to imagine the future to be "a welcoming one, a thrilling one even."

When we know Christ and make Christ known, we are professing that we stake our future on the promise of resurrection, for our own lives, the entire beloved community, the whole earth. Jurgen Moltmann once said, "Hope must take root in the future that God promises" (as cited in Connections Year C, vol 3, p12).

There is a new future ahead, and we bear witness to it now, as Christ's body in the world today. The Spirit of Truth, the Spirit of Christ is not gone from this world, and is leading us still, into a future that, with God's help, is that welcoming, thrilling one.

I see that Spirit of compassion and truth and hope in your life together. Over these past months, the Pastor Nominating Committee members among you, and all your pastors have testified about you. That you are a community that invites the whole person in, gifts and sufferings all. That you are a community that trusts Christ to be made known in and through your whole life, together. You welcome the stranger in Christ's name, with your outreach and ministries alongside those experiencing housing instability, or grief, or those who live with addiction or struggle with mental health. You welcome little children in worship, and through your Preschool and the joy of vacation Bible school. You are an inclusive community of faith where all may experience Christ's welcome and feel a part of the whole life of the body. Your testimony to the Spirit of truth in all these

ways is the very enactment of the peace of God for which the world longs and to which we are invited in the here and now. I see it, and I pray more in the coming days will see it and see themselves in it, and see its potential for the world.

Joy J. Moore, theologian and Christian of strong personal faith said recently, "Because you can't be what you haven't seen, we focus our imagination on what God has done in order to recognize what God is doing." - Joy J Moore (Luther Seminary- Dear Working Preacher, May 31, 2022).

Paul tells us what God is doing: pouring love into our hearts. Being present with us. Hope is lived in deep paradox. We can have hearts full to overflowing with God's love poured into them. And at the same time there is still room for them to hold grief, hold questions, hold sadness. Human life is like this. The gospel promise points us toward a future and a realm that is not fully realized. And even so, we have peace with God, because we know a crucified and risen Christ, who shows us the way.

It is a well worn path, this path from suffering to hope. Paul knows it well. Christ knows it well, and as we know Christ, and make him known to others, we walk it together.