

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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Reflections: Character Development 101
Romans 5:1-5

We have been talking these last weeks about reflections we have been having as staff and some of the ways God has been speaking. Last week John talked about Sabbath, rest, and this week I'd like to explore some understandings around suffering. Let's pray together.

Gracious God, it is hard for us to get our arms and minds around how deep Your love is for us. Father, we really can't boast about anything. We know with all of our heart that Your wounds have paid the ransom for us. I pray that You would be in my mind and on my lips and in my heart, that You would work in spite of me, and that I would speak Your words, not mine. In Your holy and gracious Name, I pray. Amen.

For reasons unknown to me, God has called me into places that I would rather not go. He has called me into opportunities that I don't feel worthy of going into. Much of what I'm called to do is to walk humbly alongside of people in their pain and suffering, alongside of them in their spiritual, their emotional, their physical, and their psychological pain. God has given me opportunities to be with people. Again, I don't feel worthy of that.

Just this week, Monday, I prayed with a man, 87 years old, dying of lung cancer. He had been a musician all of his life. We met and talked, and I said, "Bob, any regrets, any unfinished business, anything you are afraid of and want to talk about?" "No, Rich. None at all." "Bob, do you need to tell somebody you love them? Do you need to say you are sorry to somebody? Do you need to forgive someone? Do you need to say thank you to somebody?" "Not really, Rich. I'm really at peace. I have a strong faith. I've got to be honest with you. I don't want to die, but I don't want to live in such a compromised way, struggling for breath and oxygen." It was a holy visit. We prayed together and as I was leaving I heard him say to Marilyn, his wife, "Marilyn, I love you more than you would ever know." I heard him say to his son, Lynn, "Hey, Lynn, I need you to know I'm proud of you, and I love you."

Well, I was asked to come back again on Friday because Bob was closer to death. We read Scripture and we had this holy time of prayer. Bob had his eyes closed the whole time. He was lying flat in bed. We read some promise-filled words. We read Psalm 23 and we anointed him and prayed over him. Bob said nothing this whole visit and as I was about to leave, I saw his finger rise up, and he said, "Rich, come here." I put my ear down next to his mouth, and I heard him say, "And, Rich, I love you, too." What a gift for me! I just felt at that moment that God's Spirit was poured into my heart, and His love was poured into my heart.

Tuesday Jody and I were called to the Emergency Room to be with a man who was dying. This 95-year-old guy with such great wisdom and heart had fallen on his face. He had fractured

bones and there was bleeding in his brain that rapidly progressed to his death. I just had memories of how I had learned from this guy. What a guy! This was powerful.

For me in those moments, it is simply about showing up. It is not about having the answers. It is about just embracing true feelings, acknowledging feelings of sadness and fear and anger and disappointment and uncertainty, and I get to be there to hear that. I get to be there to remind them that they are not alone, to encourage them to hold on to the hope and the certainty of that hope even in the midst of the uncertainty going on in those moments.

A couple weeks ago I was called as a chaplain to be in the place where a family of a 26-year-old young woman had died as a result of a reaction to having a diabetic episode and not having anything for her diabetes. I was with this family for six intense hours. I really didn't want to be there. It was really hard. I had to tell her mother and stepfather and brother and sister about her dying. It was really hard, and I was ready to leave many times, but it was really amazing. During that time, I was asked three different times to pray with this family. It was powerful for me to be there and just to hear the what-ifs and the shame-filled stories that some of them had about the fact that they had been disengaged in their relationship with her.

Last night I spoke to a couple on the phone who had spent countless dollars and countless hours battling infertility. They spoke to me of their broken hearts and their empty hands and arms and their desire that a faithful God would bring a child to them somehow some way and shine His faithfulness through the darkness of their pain. The places and the stories that, undeserving, I've been invited into, walking on holy ground with people, humbled to witness how God shows up in spite of me in those moments. With many people in their trials and tribulations I've encountered the very heartfelt feelings of their anger and their feelings of abandonment and their "Rich, where is God?" I've heard over and over this natural question that comes to many of us in the midst of suffering, "Why, God? Why me?" Why ALS and SMA? Why cancer? And why do children die? And why, God, is there so much disease and famine and war? Over and over the question *why* surfaces. It is a natural question. It is a question that, I think, at some point all of us will ask. Why, God, why? Why infertility? Why famine? Why senseless killing of all kinds?

When I am asked that question, my response is always the same. There is somehow the expectation that we as clergy can explain the whys that they are asking of God, but I want to be honest with you. We can't. And if we try, sometimes we confuse matters and make things even worse and so I say the same thing all the time. I don't know why. I really don't know why. I can't fathom the mind of God. It is too big. It is too deep. It is just way beyond my small, little mind. I truthfully don't know why, and if you do, you need to explain it to me. God's ways are mysterious for me. I don't understand the causes and yet, I wonder and marvel more than I ever have much more than I doubt and lose faith. For me, these personal and ministerial experiences have helped me more and more to feel comfortable with the mystery of God. They have helped me feel all the more grateful that God asked me to show up.

Early on in ministry I read a book by an author named Philip Yancey. It is a study of Job and Job's suffering called *Disappointment with God*. It is just a great book. I don't know if it is still in print, but this book impacted me and shaped my understanding in a lot of ways. Yancey says in the book that God loves it when we ask why, that God desires us to ask why because when we ask God why, it is an expression of our intimacy with God. It means that somehow we have an encounter or a relationship or an understanding with God. We wouldn't ask Buddha or Smith, but we would ask God. "Why, God?"

If I were to bring you, Andy, home to dinner with me, probably I'd call Jody and say, "Make extra food." And if we were supposed to be there for dinner at six o'clock and you and I showed up at seven, much as I would like Jody to ask you why we were an hour late, she wouldn't ask you. She would ask me. The truth is, we don't ask why of those that we aren't in a relationship with, right? Many times I've wanted to ask somebody why they were doing what they are doing in the line at Target, why they are berating their child or whatever, but it is not my right to ask why because I don't really know them. I am not in a relationship with them, but God loves it when we ask Him why.

A third of the Psalms are lament Psalms—cries to God. "Where are You? Why have You forsaken me? Why have You hidden Your face from me? Where are You? Why aren't You here?" God can answer that question in our pain and suffering. God can explain Himself, let me tell you! But the truth of the matter is, we might not understand the response on this side of eternity. We might go, "Huh? I don't get it." And the truth is, even if we understood why, a lot of times it wouldn't change how we feel. You see, life is a mystery to be lived. It is not a problem to be solved. I'll be honest, life feels unfair. But I really and truly believe that God is fair and that God gives us a lot of times what we need from the suffering in our lives.

Yancey says in his book, and I love this line, "Faith is believing in advance what will only make sense in reverse." You see, God has answered the question of why. It is the same answer that kids get in the children's sermon all the time. The answer to why is in the who of Jesus. God has answered Himself. He has answered Himself in Jesus because Jesus has shown us that somehow, some way through His power we can have a victory over the darkness and the sin and the brokenness of this world. It may not be in this world. It may be in the eternity to come but because of what Jesus has done for us, we can be reminded that we are not alone and that we have this eternal hope, this future hope that will not disappoint us. I don't know why, but I do know that there are outcomes. There are things that transpire that happen to us when we are suffering. Paul explains some of that in our text for this morning in Romans 5:1-5. I am reading from the New Living translation.

¹ Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. ² Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory.

³ We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. ⁴ And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. ⁵ And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.

In the first couple of verses Paul makes it clear that the big picture for us in the midst of uncertainty is this certain hope that we have. Paul says that we can have confidence by claiming faith, by standing in faith, by standing on this unmerited grace that we don't really deserve. But it is not about us, and it is not about whether we deserve it. It is about Jesus. It is about a loving Father. It is about a cross. It is about an empty tomb. The price has been paid by the flowing of His blood. That is what Paul is saying. And Paul is saying, too, that it is about a decision of faith. It is about believing that there is this future glory to come. In the middle of suffering, it is a hope

to look forward to and live forward to a hope that God's faithfulness is with us. My favorite hymn is one that we sing here all the time. It is kind of a theme hymn for this church, *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*. "Morning by morning new mercies I see." Faith that comes new every morning is a great faithfulness that we have been given. Grace that is new every morning. "Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow." Strength for today and a bright hope for when? Tomorrow! Great is God's faithfulness for you and for me.

In verses 3 and 4 of Romans, Paul says that it is not a matter of whether we will suffer or not, but it is more about how we react to the suffering and how we are changed in the process of suffering. It is natural for us to want to figure it out, to explain it to ourselves. Somehow we want to make a correlation or a connection to our faithlessness or to God's wrath and judgment. Obviously this is happening because I am being punished for something that happened 15 years ago. We try so hard to explain it, but we don't understand why.

My father was dying of liver cancer in 1985, and a guy I grew up with, Dave, who was new to his faith, he had just given his life to Christ, came to visit. Dave set me down and he said, "Rich, you know why your dad has cancer?" "No, Dave, I'd like to know." "Well, your dad has cancer because he has unconfessed sin in his life. Your dad could be healed. He could be healed if he confessed his sin and if you and your father had enough faith so that he could be healed." "I'm sorry, Dave. It is truly not that easy, and if it is up to my faith, I know my dad is not going to be healed because I don't have enough faith."

When we suffer, the truth is that it changes our world. It turns us upside down. It somehow shapes a new way for us to see the world. Many times we lose control when we suffer, don't we? We realize how fragile we really are. We realize our mortality. It is much easier for you and me to trust God when things are going well. When we are in the midst of suffering, it is hard to trust God, but it is in those places that I think our trust really gets deepened and developed and becomes more than just a theory. It becomes part of our lives. It becomes part of our fiber and our character. I know that many times when suffering comes, I am kind of like, "God, first of all, I can't begin to rejoice in the suffering. Paul is a little crazy in asking that." And I find myself saying, "You know what? Enough character development already! I *am* a character, and I feel like it shaped me, and I'm doing okay. I'm far from perfect, but stop it all ready!" If we can't explain it, then we don't really welcome it, and we don't want it. The truth is, Jesus said this in John's Gospel in the 16th chapter:

³³ ...Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.

Take heart. The victory is ultimately going to be won for us. What Paul is saying is, there is really no suffering, and Jesus is saying, there is really no option in suffering. It is going to happen, and it is okay for us to wonder why. But I want to say that there are outcomes, and Paul does, too. There are things that we can't control, but God uses the reality of our pain and suffering to form us, to shape us. For some, we may grow in patience. We may learn to persevere, Paul says. We learn to endure.

I am being reminded of my limitations. The reality is that humility can develop. A sense of survival is embraced in our suffering. I struggle with a little physical pain. I found out I have a sciatic nerve. I knew that a year and a half ago. It took me a year and a half to get an MRI. I had the MRI a couple of weeks ago, and it might take me another year and a half to look at the

results. That is because, really, I'm afraid of what I'm going to find out and, yeah, it hurts, and yeah, I just popped a bunch of Advil, but the truth of the matter is God is teaching me how to be humble. I have to reach out to doctors. I have to ask other people how they are dealing with the pinched nerve in their back. I don't like suffering. I don't want suffering, but I hope that it shapes me in some way. I hope that it humbles me in some way.

Paul is saying that we learn endurance and that endurance shapes our character. New awakenings happen to us when we are suffering. I will never forget the new awakening that happened to a friend of mine, Bill. Bill helped people. He did heart surgery. He did the first transplant with a group of doctors in this city. Well into his fifties, Bill was in the hospital for the first time in his life other than his birth and visiting patients with a blood clot behind his eye. There was a good chance he would not only lose his eye, but he would lose his life if the blood clot went to his brain. I'll never forget visiting him in the hospital. He said, "Wow! I have changed my attitude toward my patients. I have always had kind of get-tough, get-through-it attitude," he said, "but after being in the hospital for five days, I've learned that you get wakened up a lot in the night." And he said, "I really never knew how bad the food here is." Now that happened about 20 years ago, and the food has changed for those of you who are sensitive to food in the hospital but the truth is, Bill suddenly became much more compassionate in his work as a doctor. It really shaped him and changed his character.

Another possibility is that God might be teaching us how to receive love. He might be teaching us to grow deeper and deeper and stronger into our relationship. St. Francis says that it is in giving that we receive. This past fall a young guy, my age, Tim, was diagnosed with a rare form of leukemia. Tim and his family, Susie and their three boys, they really came together. Tim was pretty strong, I think a semi-outgoing guy. I mean he wasn't arrogant, but he was a guy who was used to doing life and solving problems himself. Then he got this diagnosis and went through a number of treatments. Things were getting better for a while. It was so cool. He led us through a prayer and healing service for him in the chapel, and it was a holy, really moving time.

Things were getting better, and there was a chance of a stem cell transplant. Then things got worse, and the leukemia went into his bones. It left him shattered. This guy went through just a lot of suffering and so did his family and those around him. It was a very hard and painful time. The ups and downs and the wiggles of the rope that he was on, the tight wire, but friends and community and this church joined in. They brought meals. Neighbors planted beds of flowers in the spring, and people showed up not with answers, but with the question of "How can I help?" Many just showed up and started doing things. Tim and Susie and the boys and the family and the neighbors and the community and me, we all experienced some character development. It was hard. It was really painful.

Tim died in July, but he never gave up his hope. He never gave up his fight. He never gave in to discouragement. I never heard the guy complain one time. In a holy evening together before he died, he cried and wept in my arms and said, "Rich, I'm not afraid to die. I have faith. It is not just leaving my family. I love Susie. I love Dan. I love Sam. I love Timmy. I love my mom, Joyce. But I don't want to leave this world." He wanted to live. In a celebration of life in this room, it was an amazing time of us telling stories and talking about Tim. That afternoon right after the service, an email showed up on my computer. It had been an amazing service. I looked around the room, people shoulder to shoulder, and I wondered whose life was being changed today because of God's faithfulness to Tim, the song sung by Steve Haines, and the words that were spoken by family.

The email said, "I'm a regular church attender but I want to make it clear that my heart was profoundly spoken to. I prayed that those attending the service today who didn't have a relationship with Jesus would be moved to get one. I truly believe that God brought some newbies to Himself today. I have no doubt that Tim and his family felt covered and comforted by your church walking alongside of him." Tim's life came to an early end. He received the future hope that did not disappoint. It didn't disappoint him. Did God allow that to happen? Did God make that happen so that his family and friends would deepen and develop in their characters? I don't really know. I'm not sure, but I think some amazing things happened that day. I think God showed up for his family and He continues to show up in amazing ways. Here is what Paul says in Romans 8.

¹⁸ Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later.

Yes, our future hope will be fulfilled just like Tim's future hope was fulfilled. I am going to end with a story about a guy named Karl Wallenda of the famous Wallenda family. They were high-wire trapeze artists. Karl was 65 years old, and Karl was going to walk across this gorge in Georgia. It was called Tallulah Gorge, 750 feet deep, close to a thousand feet wide. There were 30,000 people gathered. The walk across this gorge was the most dangerous walk he had ever attempted. It was the most dangerous because of the thermal currents. This guy is 6 foot 7. He was told by his brother that it was the craziest, dumbest thing he had ever tried to do. It took him 20 minutes, 616 steps, to walk across that span. He started on the far side, and he came to the platform exhausted. The crowd was screaming and cheering. Somebody yells out, "It was the greatest walk ever!"

Suddenly a guy goes, "Hey, walk back. Walk back to the other side!" And Karl is thinking, "I barely made it. I only practiced for one walk, one way." This guy kept going, "Do it! You can do it!" Finally Karl looked down and said, "You are right. I can do it. I can do it if you get up on my shoulders and you walk with me across the gorge. Yeah, come on. Get up here, tough guy! Jump up on my shoulders!"

Paul makes it clear that suffering in many ways is about jumping up on the shoulders of Jesus. It is jumping up on His shoulders and knowing that we can walk across gorges, through pain and suffering and knowing that there is this future hope, that He carries us in our suffering. So I want to encourage you to keep walking and keep discovering how your character is being formed. He carries us on the tightrope of our suffering, giving us patience, humility, people to be with us. What is God trying to teach you? Let's pray together.

Lord God, we know that we can't walk the path of suffering on our own. We know clearly that we need You to walk with us. Forgive us for the times when we have been afraid, for the times when we have stood still and haven't had the courage to walk. In the silence of this moment, engage us in a powerful way. Remind us that we are not alone, that You are with us, that we have the promise of a future hope that will not disappoint us, so give us the faith we need. Hear our confessions and hear our pleas in this moment (pause). Carry us, gracious God. In Your Name, we pray. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.