

WGUMC May 22, 2016 "Suffering into Hope" Romans 5:1-5

Thursday morning I was looking at the newspaper and saw a photo of a woman hiking up a steep trail near Newhall Community Park in Concord. I've never been there, but I've hiked similar hills. I love the caption under the photo. Though the woman is on that trail four days a week, she says, "This hill never gets easy." And I thought, boy, what a metaphor for life: the hill that never gets easy.

I was thinking about life as I ran up the hill on Pipeline Road in Felton on Friday. I guess I do that just to remind myself that I'm still in treatment. Today is day #343 out of 378 days of chemo (but who's counting). Five more weeks to go. I'm grateful that I have more energy now, but I've gained some weight and that is slowing me down. So even with all my determination and discipline, the hill isn't getting any easier.

That's life. Even if you spend all of it down here on the flat, life can seem like a pretty hard hill to climb and we have to

climb it seven days a week. And while I can't tell you that reading the Bible will make it easier, I am hoping that our text today can help us see how to make it better. Life is full of pain and suffering, as you know, but Paul's message to the Romans is: It gets better.

Early on in life, it's hard to believe that. When we are young, we have so few coping skills when it comes to suffering, and we get pretty frustrated. We get angry. Anger seems to be our favorite response to suffering in the first half of our life. We just have no time for it. We have more important things to do, as Richard Rohr describes in his book, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*.

According to Rohr, in the first half of life, we are busy making our life, creating an identity for ourselves, and we like to live the lie that we are therefore in control, that we are doing it all by ourselves. So, when suffering comes, it comes as a direct attack on our fragile egos. Do you remember Middle

School? All the insecurities, the awkwardness, the acne: if that isn't suffering, I don't know what is. And we got angry about it because it wasn't fair, because we didn't do anything to deserve it. And there were times that we were sure there was no way we could stand one more minute of it.

Because we couldn't see very far into the future and had no patience to wait even if we could, we didn't think the situation was ever going to change. And so we responded in typical adolescent fashion by rebelling, bullying, teasing, gossiping, or by self-harming. We got so angry that we were suffering that we had to hurt somebody, even if that somebody was us.

Now I wish things magically got better once we left Middle School. But the fact is that our culture doesn't teach us what to do with suffering, only how to make other people suffer. So there are too many of us who are dealing with the really hard stuff of life in pretty much the same way we dealt with it in

Middle School, by getting angry and projecting it onto someone else or by holding it in and hurting ourselves.

When I was living with epilepsy, I held it in. On the outside, everyone thought I was doing remarkably well. But if they could have looked inside me, they could have seen that I was depressed, which is just anger turned inward. Even after the surgery, when the seizures stopped, I was still angry. I was angry because of all the years the seizures had taken away from me. I had missed out on the freedom, the independence, the risk-taking and the learning that I could have been doing in my teens and twenties. Now I was a pastor and I had to be the grown up; yet I had missed out on growing up.

If I suffered for sixteen years with seizures, I still had a lot to learn about suffering. When we just get angry at it or depressed about it, there is no way that it will ever lead to anything but more suffering. And even when we know that, it's amazing how often we go down that same road again and again

and again. Thank goodness for these verses in Romans where Paul talks about a way to suffer that takes us down a different road, one that leads us to hope instead.

The hill doesn't get easier, but it does get better. The question is: when does this happen? How does it happen? Somewhere in the transition from the first to the second half of our lives, we stop getting angry at the hill. At some point we realize that getting angry at it or upset by it won't make it go away and that we are running the risk of making everyone else go away. So what do we do? We've already tried asking God to take it away, day after day after day. But there's something more we can do. We can ask God to help us look at the hill and see it, experience it, in a different way. We can ask God to use our suffering to show us that there is a better way.

Here's an old story told in a new way: When I had epilepsy, I felt very lonely. From the time I was around 12 to the time I was 28, I wasn't mad at God, but I often didn't feel very close

to God. Maybe it was all the meds I was taking. Then one day, recovering from surgery, Jesus walked in on me. I was sitting there reading my Bible, when I felt a hand on my shoulder. I could almost see someone standing next to me, assuring me that I wasn't alone, that I had never been alone. And in that moment, something changed.

My "heart-strangely-warmed" experience didn't change the situation but it changed the way I looked at it. Now I could see Christ in it. All those years of being angry and thirsty were redeemed in that moment when I could feel the hand of God resting on me.

Twenty some years later, I was diagnosed with cancer and I flashed back to that moment, and I prayed for the grace to do a better job living with cancer than I had done living with epilepsy. I didn't want to waste one minute being angry about what was happening to me, because by now I knew that God

would use it one way or another to bring something good out of it.

Faced with a year of chemo, one of the things I was looking for was endurance, and all I had to do was look around here to find it. Folks like Ruby Goodnight and Walt Mounts taught us all about endurance. You and I have learned that the God who got the two of them to church every Sunday in their last few years will get us through whatever we have facing us this year. Second-half-of-life suffering produces endurance.

But I didn't just want to endure. I didn't just want to get through the treatments and go back to "normal," whatever that was. It may sound crazy, but I wanted to go back to "better." I knew that God had used brain surgery to introduce me to Jesus Christ, so I trusted God to use the breast cancer to bless me in some new and wonderful way. I wanted to be like Ruby, whenever we would ask her how she was feeling and she would say, "Thankful." What a character she was. Exactly.

Despite her cancer, Ruby kept Christ ever before her, and we can, too. The more we look to Christ, the more we will look like Christ—the way he lives, the way he loves—and the more our endurance will take on a Christ-like character. Suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character. Having seen it in Ruby, in Claudia, in Shirley, in Wayne, in Walt, I wanted it, too.

I'm still working on it—or better to say, God is still working on me. That's why I go to the trees, so God can work on me. But the way God works is always a mystery. As I was running and meditating on this text, it occurred to me that one thing I'm doing in the forest is getting better acquainted with the Holy Spirit and learning to experience God as Trinity.

Looking back down the hill, thinking back on my life, I can see how I started out my faith journey with a belief in "God the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." Then the epilepsy came and introduced me to "Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord."

Finally, cancer has been letting me get to know "the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life." [quotations from the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds]

As I puff my way up the hill at Henry Cowell, I think this hill, this life, is not getting any easier. But then I hear the wind blowing as the breath of God, the Spirit of God, in those magnificent redwoods. I know that those trees have endured a long time. Their burls and burn marks have given them a lot of character. And the wind that has blown for centuries through their branches blows through me and fills me with hope. I can't really explain it. I only know that while it isn't getting easier, life is getting better.

So I have come to agree with Paul that it's ok to boast in our sufferings, "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."

So whatever your suffering looks like, whether it's a hill or a hole, whether it's a health condition or family situation, a job crisis or a faith crisis—God didn't cause it, but God wants to USE it as a means of grace, as a channel through which the Holy Spirit will pour the love of God into your heart and into your life.

What I have learned in all of this is that our experience of suffering is essentially Trinitarian. First, our suffering makes us cry out to God, the One who created us and is still working on us. Secondly, it brings us closer to Christ, the One who suffered for and continues to suffer with us. And thirdly, it breaks us open to receive the Holy Spirit, the One who sustains us and fills us with life and hope. So you see, we don't need a theology degree to understand the Trinity. By the grace of God, we live it every day. And though life doesn't get easier, in the

name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, I promise you that it gets better and better. Amen.