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Title: Suffering and Hope

Preaching: Senior Associate Minister Ryan Hazen

Scripture: [Philippians 2:1-8](#)

Text: [Romans 5:1-15](#)

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There's a ridiculous story but funny story about a man trying to cross the street. However, when he steps off the curb, a car comes screaming around the corner and heads straight for him. The man walks faster, trying to hurry across the street, but the car changes lanes and is still coming at him. So the man turns around to go back, but the car changes lanes again and is still coming at him. By now, the car is so close and the man so scared that he just stops in the middle of the road.

The car gets real close, then swerves at the last possible moment and stops next to the man. The driver rolls down the window. Lo and behold, it's a squirrel driving the car. And the squirrel says to the man, "Not as easy as it looks, is it?"¹

It is a metaphor for life, isn't it? Life isn't as easy as it looks. If one were just to look at any one of us human beings, we see just the facade – just the look we put on for outward appearances – just the good stuff that we post on Facebook. But all of us have those things that have happened in our life in the past or have things that are happening at this very moment that has brought us to our knees. Let's lump them into a bucket and call them "sufferings." That's not my word but Paul's in the fifth chapter of Romans.

The thing about Romans is that you have to hold the entire thesis of the book in your head to examine a small chunk of it so it makes some sense. This passage is a perfect example. Paul starts off with the word, "therefore." "Therefore" is a signal that he has just said something important that is going to provide the foundation for what he's about to say next.

Chapter four is all about Abraham, who believed God's promise and God blessed him. Paul has just explained how Gentiles who believe in Jesus are true children of Abraham even though they aren't Jewish. Abraham wasn't Jewish because "Jewish" mean descended from Judah and Judah was Abraham's GREAT GRANDSON. It was Abraham's FAITH that made him blessed, not his lineage. That's chapter four. It's FAITH that matters.

"THEREFORE," Paul says, "since we have been justified by FAITH, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." If you stop to think about that, you'll realize that, throughout history, our relationships with God and each other has been anything but peaceful. From the moment Adam and Eve

disobeyed God, we've been doing what we can to disrupt peace with God. Even when we try to do God's will, we mess up. The human condition is not naturally one of peace. It is one of conflict.

Now, pay particular attention to these words, "Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

What a remarkable statement: "we glory in our sufferings." How can we possibly do that--glory in our sufferings? Sufferings hurt. Sufferings are inconvenient. Some of us spend our lives trying to avoid suffering. This is a good time to talk about the role of suffering in our lives. Some suffering we bring on ourselves by the choices we make. Some suffering is brought upon us through no action of our own. Many of you are aware that I've just arrived home from a week in Puerto Rico. I was there with the Geist Christian youth mission trip. There were 14 high school students and four adults. First, let me say that you have every reason to be proud of each one of the youth on that trip (and adults too) but especially the kids. They were kind and gracious and worked hard and had fun. They were flexible and understanding and they worked hard. They were insightful and respectful and faithful and, did I mention, they worked hard.

This is my second trip to the island post-hurricanes including the adult mission trip from Geist Christian Church last December. Hurricanes Irma and Maria pummeled the island 21 months ago. Some in the urban areas were without power a few weeks. Most in the mountains where we were working this week were without power for almost a year. Many people still live three and four families to a house awaiting repairs. Even though they are US citizens, they have been treated differently than those who have experienced disasters in the states. They have known and still know suffering.

Suffering, whether brought on by natural disasters or by our own choices lead us to three inevitable feelings – DOUBT, DISCOURAGEMENT, and DESPAIR. When you are suffering, you begin to DOUBT your worth, doubt whether you are worthy of anything good in life. Doubt leads to discouragement that things will ever turn around and the longer the suffering, the greater the chance of despair. DESPAIR is defined as the complete loss or absence of hope. When despair sets in, we have convinced ourselves that a turnaround is not possible.

Everyone who lived through Hurricanes Irma and Maria has every reason to claim suffering and I'm sure that they have known the feelings of doubt and discouragement and despair over these past 21 months. But here's the thing. Ask any of the 18 people on this trip that returned last night or any of the 11 on the trip in December if that's what they heard when they talked to people they encountered. I believe everyone would tell you, "NO, that's not what we heard. In fact, we heard the opposite."

I think everyone on these trips would tell that they heard stories of resilience in the face of adversity, of hope in the face of despair, and of unity in the face of division. The people that we have encountered pointed to a faith that carries them through times of trial. It is almost as if they are internalizing Paul's words as words for them - "...suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." Spend about three minutes around the people of Puerto Rico, not pulling into port on a cruise ship but really WITH the people, and you will experience the Spirit that has been given to them.

But it's not just a promise for them. It's a promise for us. "God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." I don't know anyone in our congregation who experienced Hurricanes Irma and Maria but I do know people in our congregation who have experienced suffering in a variety of forms – some self-imposed, some as an innocent bystander. Some suffer in grieving, some suffer in broken relationships, some suffer from the trap of depression, some suffer from a job that is not fulfilling, some suffer from financial distress and some suffer from a relationship with God that feels broken.

It is not my place to tell you that suffering is wonderful and just enjoy the ride. Quite the contrary. Suffering is horrible, suffering is painful, and suffering is a place where it is impossible to find joy at the moment. But it is my place to tell you that the suffering you experience that produces DOUBT, DISCOURAGEMENT, and DESPAIR is not with you permanently. When you start with God's love, you begin to feel the love of others. When you feel the love of others, discouragement and despair begin to be pushed out in favor of HEALTH and HAPPINESS and HOPE.

Given this day is Father's Day, let me conclude with a stereotypical football analogy. You are likely aware, even if you are not a football fan, that statisticians and fans of the game keep statistics on almost every facet of the game. That's even truer in fantasy football. You may be familiar with the passing yards or number of touchdowns by a quarterback or maybe the

catching yards by a wide receiver. What may be a less obvious statistic is YARDS AFTER CONTACT. Yards after contact is the yards a runner produces after he's made contact with a defender whether it's via strength, elusiveness or a combination of both. Obviously, this skill makes a running back even more valuable because extra yards create even more fantasy points.

The number one NFL running back for 2018 in the category YARDS AFTER CONTACT was Saquon Barkley of the New York Giants. He was first in rushing yards after contact with 736 and second in receiving yards after contact with 195. Over half of his yards – 56.3% to be exact - came after he had already been hit. If Barkley had given up as soon as hit with an obstacle (like an oncoming defensive lineman), he would have gained 931 fewer yards last season. He would have gone from 2nd leading rusher to 57th in the NFL if he hadn't kept going, kept moving forward despite being hit.²

Life is not as easy as it looks. It's messy most of the time and there are sufferings around us and in us that weigh us down. It is like being in a race when it starts to rain and you hit a mud pit and have to go through it but in the process of going through it, you can feel the mud - the DOUBT, DISCOURAGEMENT, and DESPAIR weighing you down. You can't go through it fast because of the weight. You stay upright and you keep moving forward. You have to concentrate on each painful step. Something compels you to continue. In the distance, you see what appears to be a sheet of rain – almost like a car wash rinse – and then it clears.

The person you are on the other side of the mud is stronger, with a greater understanding of how to run the race. That person is tired but is healthier, happier and more hopeful than the one that entered the mud. From this point forward, you have tools when you are on the front end of what Paul calls sufferings. You can make the choice not to DOUBT because God walks beside you even when you don't sense God's presence. You can make the choice not to be DISCOURAGED because God is in control. You can make the choice not to despair because our God is good. May it be so for you this day and in the days of suffering that may still be in store for you.

¹ From Nathan Hann sermon, September 18, 2018, found at www.bonnernaz.com

² From Joshua M. Brown site called The Reformed Broker, post from November 21, 2018, found at www.thereformedbroker.com