

The Serial of Suffering

Romans 5: 1 - 5

A sermon preached in Duke Chapel on May 30, 2010 by the Revd M. Keith Daniel

Three years ago, on a warm spring Saturday afternoon, I was sitting in my car reading while my daughter Loren and my son Madison, 7 and 8 years old respectively at the time, were running in their first youth track club inter-squad meet. It was a “non-competitive” meet to prepare them for real competition, and to assess their speed. Occasionally, I would look up to see what event the youngsters were lining up for. At one point I noticed the older youth were lining up to run the 400 meter dash, and I assumed that my kids' age group would not run the 400. I didn't run track until high school, and I knew from experience why the 400 meter dash is called a “beast's race.” The one time I ran the 400, I thought I was going to literally die. It's called a dash, because it's an all out sprint for a quarter mile. It is an excruciatingly painful race. The only thing more painful than running the 400 is training to run the 400. All of a sudden I look up and there's my baby Loren lining up to run the 400. I panicked, and I was too far away to wave her off. I was parked across the track from the starting line approximately the 250 meter mark. If only I had known that she was going to have to run this event, I would have prepared her for the worst. Well, I could only hope that she would be able to suffer through it to the finish. As she reached the 220 meter mark, Loren was holding her side and gasping for air. Instead of waving her off, I did what any loving Father would do. I yelled at her, “Baby, you can do it, use your arms, and don't worry about slowing down. Even if you have to walk just don't stop.”

In several of his letters, Paul employs running as an analogy for the Christian faith. 1 Cor 9:24, “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it.” 2 Tim 4:7, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Although Paul does not explicitly use running as an analogy in today's NT lesson, Rom 5: 1 - 5 evokes the metaphor of running for the glory that is yet to be revealed to us. Unlike the 400 meter race, the Christian faith is not a dash. It is a challenging marathon.

Commentators believe Paul had been an apostle for more than twenty years when he wrote his letter to Christians in Rome. He wrote from deep personal experience of running against the faith to running for it. As one who stalked Christians and made them suffer to one who preached the faith he tried to destroy, Paul has endured what I call the serial of suffering. Paul makes a list of this kind of suffering in at the end of Rom 8, tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril and war. This suffering is the on-going and persistent experience of being bombarded by one crisis after

another. It is a series of unexpected and catastrophic events. It is the experience of Job being broken to the point of cursing the day he was born. It is the experience of being afflicted by one sickness, pain, or disease after another. Somebody here today knows what I am talking about. You a friend or a loved one is experiencing great personal suffering. Too many of our neighbors at home and abroad lives are surrounded by suffering. They need, you need, I need, we all need a word from the Lord to run or walk in faith. Paul gives us such a word, three words to be exact. How fitting for Trinity Sunday.

In Rom 5: 1 - 5, Paul interweaves the language of the Trinity. God, the Father sends Jesus (our *forerunner*, Heb 6) to suffer and die for us. Through faith in the resurrected Christ, we are justified and attain God's peace and power made available through the Holy Spirit. In vss. 3 – 5, Paul in an effort to train and prepare the Christian mindset toward suffering uses a rhetorical form that effectively serves as a mnemonic device. Let's look and listen in again on these verses. "And not only that, we also boast in our sufferings (plural), knowing that suffering produces (a) endurance, and endurance produces (b) character, and character produces (c) 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." Paul's theology of suffering is crafted in such a way that inspires us to meditate upon God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Notice how each keyword following sufferings occurs twice.

Endurance is our first word. Endurance is the first fruit produced when the faithful suffer and even when they die in the Lord. God as Father is revealed as the God who endures in sending Jesus suffer and die on the cross for our salvation. The Father's mercy endures whether we are firm in the faith, barely holding on, or even when we've fallen out of the race. This first word, endurance is a fruit of God's love. It's in the basket of the fruit of the Spirit Paul list in Galatians 5. You'll notice there that it follows love, joy, and peace. (Translated in some text as *patience*, but more accurately as *longsuffering*). Longsuffering is what God is. God is a parent who has suffered the agonizing pain of the death of his only child. Yet, His steadfast love endures the forever. His love is inexhaustible. While we were yet sinners he proved his loved for us. There's a line in one of my favorite songs that says, "we can run into God's love but we can't run out of it."

Now we can look again at Paul's list of the serial of suffering and rejoice when he says (Rom 8:35 - 37), "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... Yet, for your sake we are killed all day long. We are like sheep for the slaughter. No in all things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us."

The second word from God Paul offers to us is *character*--the character of Christ as conqueror, as our forerunner who overcame sin and conquered death. We are called to follow him. We are called to run as the unknown author of Heb wrote, "...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

We are called to be imitators of Christ. We were created in God's image and God's likeness. Our character as Christians should distinguish us from the world. We need to be schooled in Godly character today. Our character involves what we habitually do, not what we end up doing at the moment of moral crisis. When someone has a breakdown in character, the break most likely happened long before it became public. Character must be developed long before the test, trial or tribulation comes. Developing our character takes reliance and constant repetition of our spiritual disciplines. Like an Olympic athlete, we are called to train and discipline our minds, bodies, and spirits to press through life's trials and tribulations. The core discipline of Christ-like character is prayer. We are called to p-u-s-h (persist in prayer until something happens) through pain like Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Last Sunday was Pentecostal Sunday, the image of the church assembled in the upper room praying is powerful. We prayed for cancer survivors last Sunday. Many survivors cling to the hope that God's grace is made perfect in human weakness, and they are sharing their faith and hope joyfully through the ordeal. I know because I am married to one of them. For two years, the prayers of the saints empowered and sustained Lorna and our family through her series of chemotherapy and radiation, and finally surgery for breast cancer. We were absolutely exhausted by the ordeal, but we felt the prayers of the people upholding us. Their prayers and acts of love strengthened our resolve and revived our hearts to run on a little while longer, to hold on and not give up. One thing you must remember, he'll work it out for you. For he is there for you. On Sunday, I had the privilege of praying with a man whose wife didn't survive, yet he was here in church because I believe he knows that God cared for her and God cares for him (that love is the character of Jesus).

In this day of great suffering around the world, we are called to model the character of Jesus, to seek God's face as we seek the welfare of our neighbors in Haiti, Chile, and right here in Durham. Many are exhausted, hurting and holding their sides. They need not only our prayers, they need our presence and our gifts of time, talent and treasure. What can we do to be as close as possible to the least and to the suffering? The character of Jesus was full of compassion. He moved toward the

poor and needy. Could we possibly be their only hope as the heart, hands, and feet of Jesus? They need to know that they are not alone.

Their lives and our lives are not in vain. The bitterness of suffering is transformed as God pours his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. The bitterness of suffering is transformed. And with each suffering event after suffering event, our Comforter and Advocate is there to refill us with the words of life. Suddenly, we are able to enjoy life even boast, to exult, to be on fire for God.

The fire of Pentecost burns brightly. Let these three words endurance, character, hope be in your head, in your heart, and in your mouth. Allow them to sink way down into your heart, and spring from your lips in praise to the God who endures, the Son whose character is a firm foundation, and the Spirit that causes us to maintain hope.

Yes, hope. Hope has the last word today. From endurance to character and character to hope and hope built on Jesus' promise that he would send an advocate and comforter to bring all that he has said and done to our remembrance. Friends, the most severe form of unending suffering is believing the lie that your sin is irreconcilable and your suffering is too great for God. The Spirit of Truth is present today to say, "Not so." "Not so."

There is hope for you as much as there is for me. Receive this word into your heart today. You might be holding your side. You might be totally out of breath. Hear the Good News, Your heavenly Father, unlike me, doesn't yell at his children. He whispers, "My child, use your arms, I know you're hurting, I feel your pain, but don't stop praying, don't stop praising me. Whatever you do, don't stop." Amen.