
Romans 5: 1-8

5 Pentecost / Proper 6 Year A

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This morning we have just had the privilege of hearing some remarkable texts from sacred scripture. Abraham and Sarah going through a crisis of faith pushing back against a God who wants to give them the desire of their hearts. A God that comes through as promised, yet with a rather miraculous set of circumstance. And then we have this incredible gospel lesson where Jesus sends his disciples out into the world as sheep among wolves to bring hope and joy to God's beloved. There are sermons galore within both of these scripture lessons, but these will have to wait for another day.

The real glory this morning I think is to be found in Paul's letter to the Romans. There is so much profound theology in these eight verses, for in total they really lay the bedrock foundation for our Christian faith. This morning, however, I want to focus us on just three of these eight verses. Paul says, "...we also 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."

One of my all time favorite films is the Shawshank Redemption which came out back in 1994 and starred Tim Robbins as Andy Dufresne and Morgan Freeman as Red. The movie takes place over a span of 20 years or so from the late 1940's through the late 1960's in a fictional prison in upstate Maine. For those of you who haven't seen this movie, allow me set it up for you. In the beginning we find Andy, a young banker, accused of murdering his wife. He is innocent of the crime, but he is found guilty and sentenced to two consecutive life sentences. Inside the

Shawshank State Prison, he befriends an inmate named Ellis Redding or Red for short and over the next 20 years they become quite close. There is a particular scene toward the end of this movie that I want to recall for you, however.

Andy has just come out of two weeks of solitary confinement and he is talking with Red at the dinner table. While referring to how he made it through his stay in solitary Andy explained that it was Mozart that kept him company. Tapping his heart and head, Andy says, "The music was here...and here. That's the one thing they can't confiscate, not ever. That's the beauty of it. Haven't you ever felt that way about music, Red?" Red's reply, "Played a mean harmonica as a younger man. Lost my taste for it. Didn't make much sense on the inside." To which Andy replied, "Here's where it makes most sense. We need it so we don't forget. That there are things in this world not carved out of gray stone. That there's a small place inside of us they can never lock away, and that place is called hope. Red shot back, "Hope is a dangerous thing [Andy]. Drive a man insane. It's got no place here. Better get used to the idea."

About twelve years later, Andy escapes from Shawshank and he heads for the Pacific coast of Mexico. It is there that he starts a new life for himself. He had planned his escape from the beginning, but it took him 20 years to carry it out. In the character of Andy Dufresne, we find an innocent man sentenced to prison for the rest of his days. He was one whose suffering produced endurance which in turn produced character and a strong sense of hope.

Toward the end of the movie, Red is paroled. Just before Andy escaped he told Red that if he ever got out to find a certain oak tree in a town called Buxton. Under that tree he would find a piece of black glass and under that he would find something that Andy wanted him to have. When Red was released he went to that spot and found some money with this letter;

Dear Red. If you're reading this, you've gotten out. And if you've come this far, maybe you're willing to come a little further. You remember the name of the town, don't you? I could use a good man to help me get my project on wheels. I'll keep an eye out for you and the chessboard ready. Remember, Red. Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies. I will be hoping that this letter finds you, and finds you well. Your friend. Andy.

We spend so much of our time trying to avoid suffering, yet it comes sometimes without warning or cause. It's inescapable. As Jesus sent his disciples out, he sent them with these words, "I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.... Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved." Paul understood what it meant to endure for he suffered immensely so that others may come to understand this one simple fact; that God proves his love for all in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Where did Paul get the strength to endure the trials of his life, and find hope in the midst of the most difficult circumstances? Simply through the love of God that had been poured into his heart by the Holy Spirit. It is there for us too.

I urge us all this morning not to avoid the suffering that comes our way, but to face it head on and endure until you find the hope; for through it all, the love of God is ever present in your hearts. In Jesus Name; Amen.