

“Love Hurts”

Genesis 18:1-5; Romans 5:1-8; Matt. 9:35-38, 10:16-20

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Here we are on this second Sunday of June, having just come off of celebrations of Trinity Sunday and Pentecost... which, of course, immediately follow the season of Easter... three of our ‘highest holy days’ in the Christian church. SOOO, here’s a question for all you devoted God-followers: Name ONE word that best describes, that most lies at the heart of, that Christian faith and worship.

Let’s see: ‘organ’ or ‘piano?’ ‘Contemporary’ or ‘traditional?’ ‘Catholic’ or ‘Protestant?’ NO. How about... **JESUS?** It is both the ‘salvific’ (saving) and ‘terrific’ (super-natural) actions of Christ that serve both as our **future hope** and **present example** in living lives which will be pleasing to the God who has made us (‘not we ourselves’). OK, beyond that ‘easy’ one word **Jesus**... that ‘name above all names’ that most likely does NOT cross our lips many times during the day. (Well, maybe in traffic or other times of frustration)... what other words might we use to succinctly describe our faith? **‘forgiveness?’ ‘unconditional love?’** Absolutely.

But I think that there is another important word that is just as representative of this Christian faith. SUFFERING. That just as intertwined in the life and ministry of Jesus were His forgiveness and unconditional love, so too was the suffering that he endured... FOR and BY the people He came to save! And I don’t just mean that which he experienced the week leading up to his crucifixion. For he also ‘suffered’ with and for those he saw every day who were hurting... as we read today: ***“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”***

(*Matthew 9:36*) Whether physical or emotional pain, Jesus love for us caused Him much suffering, of mind, body and spirit.

And so, in our passages today that range from 'Genesis to Jesus'... with a little Paul thrown in... let us consider how they all THREE point to how we can live a more 'authentic' Christian life. One in which while we seek to mimic that 'forgiveness' and 'unconditional love' of our Lord, we also recognize the role of 'suffering' in that journey. That truly, just as it was for Jesus, **'Love hurts.'**

First, we must admit to the obvious in our walk with Jesus: **There will be TRIALS.** Can I get an 'AMEN?!' Like an old song said... perhaps paraphrasing God... 'I beg your pardon, I never promised you a rose garden.' That even when our life is 'rosy'... which is a LOT of the time... those beautiful creations do come with... *thorns*, right? To use a more contemporary song lyric, 'every rose has its thorn.' Which applies both to **other people** whom we will encounter... and indeed, our very **own lives**. We all have our own personal 'thorny issues' we must deal with.

But particularly as we seek to live out our FAITH... as we seek to truly live by the example of that JESUS... well, to put it in 'casino language,' that really 'ups the ante.' As Christ told his first disciples... which we would do well to heed... ***"I am sending you out (into the world) like sheep into the midst of wolves."*** (*Mt. 10:16*) That if we pledge to 'be like Jesus'... the 'Lamb of God'... then we better be ready to be 'attacked' by those ravenous 'wolves' out in the world. To 'proudly' wear the 'cross of Christ' into a secular world who just doesn't buy in to all this 'Jesus malarky' can sometimes be akin to sporting a 'bullseye.' As a Christian, you are a 'marked man' (or woman).

To take a stand for Jesus means that, like him, we may be ***“handed over to councils”***... like ‘city councils’. Or, stand before the ‘court of public opinion.’ Which will not necessarily be sympathetic to our cause. We may be ‘flogged in their synagogues’... or at least ‘flogged’ verbally ... where even other ‘good church people’ can turn against us. Whether it’s other believers or non-believers... modern day ‘Jews or Gentiles’... we must be prepared for whatever ‘wolves’ might seek to devour us.

The real issue is not IF we will encounter trials and tribulations in life... but rather WHEN they do, how we ‘react’ to them. **Will we EMBRACE our trials?** In a book by the late Rev. Dr. John Redhead, a former Presbyterian minister in Greensboro, N.C., entitled Putting Your Faith to Work (a book loaned to me by one of our LC church members), the author rightly observed the most common response when an individual encounters hardship in their life... particularly more tragic, painful experiences: WHY? The ‘Right Reverend’ argues, however, that the question should change: Not ‘why,’ but ‘HOW?’ *“HOW will I rise above my circumstance?”* He goes on to say that no matter our outward conditions, there is *“an inner area where you are not at the mercy of the world.”* That out of any situation *“you can emerge a better person... IF that’s what you want.”* Too often, we can just wallow in our ‘mudpit’ of self-pity rather than make the effort to climb out of it...

It is just such of an ‘inner area’ of mercy and peace from which Paul spoke when he says that in addition to ‘boasting’ ***“in our hope of sharing the glory of God”*** (Romans 5:2) that ***“We also boast in our sufferings.”*** (5:3) Or as another translation says, we ***“triumph in our troubles.”*** **HOW?** How could Paul be so ‘foolish’ as to say he could ‘boast’ in his sufferings? For one, because he knew he

'wanted' to 'emerge a better person.' Because he believed that whatever sufferings he might endure, they would produce **endurance**... endurance, which would produce **character**. And that better character would result in **HOPE**. _And what? *"Hope does not disappoint us."* (Romans 5:5) Why not? Because of *"God's love."* We can love God, and God's creation, because God loved us first. A love so deep that sometimes **'love hurts.'**

Rev. Redhead gave an illustration of having been in the Himalaya mountains in India, and watching an eagle flying in the midst of a powerful storm. He fully expected those strong winds to dash the bird onto the rocks below. But much to his surprise, the stronger the wind, the higher the eagle flew. Rather than let those adverse conditions destroy, the eagle harnessed that energy to make something very positive. Instead of bringing down, lifting UP! A couple of songs come to mind, one secular, one religious: "The Wind Beneath My Wings." And what? 'And He will raise you up'... "On Eagles' Wings." In the midst of our sufferings, God can produce endurance... character... hope. God's Spirit can turn any oppressive gale into an uplifting wind...

Our inevitable struggles in life are not only to be opportunities for US to grow in our embrace of the love of God, but for OTHERS to benefit from the ways we rose above them. [???] As those who are doing 'post-graduate work' from the 'school of hard-knocks'... that school of experience whose colors are black-and-blue... we must be mindful of how the lessons we have learned can benefit others. We should, as one author put it, *"Ask yourself 'How can I keep others like myself from losing their faith but rather, make them more confident in the Lord."* Those 'others like yourself' might be your best friend... or an 'im-perfect stranger'...

In the Genesis passage, we read that ***“The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day.”*** (Genesis 18:1) The next verse says that ***“He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran... to meet them, and bowed down to the ground.”*** (Genesis 18:2) The natural assumption here is that God’s ‘appearance’ involved those three ‘men.’ God and two angels? The Triune God, Father, Son, and Spirit? Or really three MEN?

Well, since ‘Abe’ first addresses these 3 visitors as ‘lord’... and later in the passage the author speaks of the “Lord” telling Abraham that Sarah is to bear a child at the ripe old age of 90 (hence her laughter, which was certainly understandable)... we can believe them to be a Divine presence. And yet, he welcomes them in very ‘human’ ways: Bringing them water, inviting them to wash their feet, and rest under the tree... while partaking of some bread in order to ‘refresh’ themselves. He sure showed great hospitality to these three strangers in the middle of a hot day. Even though they may have looked like just ‘regular folks,’ Abraham knew that when he looked into their eyes, he was indeed looking at the face of God.

How many times do we look at a person, be it one we know very well or not hardly at all, and don’t truly SEE them? We’re in too much of a hurry, our mind on other things, too busy to really be PRESENT for another. What if we stopped to think that it was GOD staring out at you from those eyes? Bet you’d sure pay attention! I find it interesting that one of the latter books in the N.T. features a well-known verse based on this experience in the first book of the Bible:

“Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Hebrews 13:2) To show the love and

hospitality to 'stranger/angels'... 'strangels,' if you will... the resource it requires that we are most grudging with is TIME. And the EFFORT necessary to engage another person. Time and effort is what it takes to really Show God's love... precious resources that can be very hard... even 'painful'... for us to give up. Indeed, sometimes that 'Love hurts'...

Today's Scriptures remind us that as Christians we will not be spared pain and suffering... in some ways, we can experience even greater depth of injury because of our compassion for those who are, as Jesus saw, **"harassed and helpless."** But because we too, like Paul, can **"boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God,"** we also can rest assured of ultimate **"triumph in our trouble"...** **"because God's love has been poured into our hearts."** And the hope that we have is not to be kept for our own, but shared with others... even 'strang-els.' It just will take a little 'time' and 'effort.' Sometimes, to show love hurts... and is WORTH the pain...

Those of you around my era may recall a song by this name, "Love Hurts", made popular by a group named for the town Nazareth... PA, not Israel. (For a few trivia facts, its author was actually a man named 'Boudleaux.' 'Boudreaux' with an 'L.' Who wrote a number of hits for the Everly Brothers back in the 50's-60's. As well as a tune you SEC fans might know... "Rocky Top." Just FYI...) I had hoped it might have a lot of really pertinent lyrics to the message, but somehow the line "Love is just a lie made to make you blue" just DIDN'T do it for me. (Unless it's the *world's* definition of 'love,' which at times can certainly can be a lie.) But I could go along with the first line:

Love hurts, love scars, love wounds and marks.

Love is like a cloud, it holds a lot of rain.

We serve a Savior who endured many hurts, scars, wounds and marks for us. Why? Because of God's love for us. As you and I drink deep of God's refreshing Spirit of living water, may we in turn 'rain' it on others. And may we remember Jesus' words of encouragement: ***"Don't worry about what you will say, for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you."*** (Matthew 10:19-20) Let us never forget that no matter how much our 'love hurts,' our 'hurts' can lead to others' healing'...

CHARGE/BENEDICTION: Another book lent to me by a church member... in Welsh... was one by noted biographer Jon Meacham, entitled The Hope of Glory. It is a very well-written look at the statements made by Jesus from the cross. The one most relevant to our discussion of suffering would also be the one perhaps most disturbing: ***"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*** Did Jesus really think that God had abandoned Him? Did He really question just 'why' He was having to endure this suffering? In His humanity, I would say 'yes!' In His Divinity, He knew of the hope and future of the resurrection. And it is perhaps this question of Jesus that can be of most hope for us.

In Meacham's words, *"God, in Christ, has known pain, grief, and suffering... He has asked the question 'why?' But in the end, death was conquered. We too must hold on to the belief that some day, some way, all will be made new. The same hope that Jesus held onto, even in his hour of doubt."*

It is just such hope in the face of suffering and doubt that we are to carry out into a world filled with doubt. And as we go, we know that we do not bear that message alone...

LOVE MORE THAN 'E-MOTION' ... BUT **MOTION!**

NOT MERELY A NOUN... BUT A VERB!

NOT ONLY HOW WE **ACT**... BUT . WE **RE-ACT!**