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Trinity Presbyterian Church – Pensacola, FL
May 30, 2010 TRINITY SUNDAY Cycle A

LIFE IN THE SPIRIT: 1. "ENDURANCE, CHARACTER, HOPE"
John 16:12-15 Romans 5:1-5

Barbara Johnson wrote a book some years ago *STICK A GERANIUM IN YOUR HAT AND BE HAPPY* exploring her discovery of God's goodness in the midst of difficult circumstances.

Barbara Johnson came to know God better through the near death of her husband, the deaths of two sons, and other family crises. Through her depression and suicidal wishes, she came to new insights into the love, faithfulness, and power of God. She emerged with renewed faith and hope and joy. God had remained faithful to her despite her rebellion against God. She learned to trust God again. In her own words, she “discovered joy in the cesspool of life.” She learned by experience that the Holy Spirit can help you have a life of harmony and peace and hope, even in the face of suffering.

Christianity is not a vaccination against suffering in life. Romans 5 says that we can enjoy peace in spite of suffering because the peace of God somehow undergirds us, even in our worst hours, giving us serenity, balance, and even purpose for what is going on.

Dealing with tragedies like automobile wrecks, terminal illnesses, verbal abuse, financial troubles, job losses and unemployment, bankruptcies, accidents and tragedies, and oil spills and floods and hurricanes and family tensions, there is much that we cannot understand, but still God sees us through. You and I can trust God. We can have God's strength. God loves us and wants to help us no matter how complicated our lives may be, how bad our circumstances may be, no matter that events may be beyond our control. Because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, we have the privilege to rejoice in our difficulties, knowing that we will one day share in the glory of God. God has made provisions for us in Jesus Christ; his peace is our peace, his gift to us is his wholeness, his completeness, his inner strength.

Romans 5:3 encourages us to "rejoice in all our sufferings." It's one thing to endure tribulations without complaining, it is another thing to find reason to rejoice in the midst of suffering or confusion. But we can! Suffering, though painful, can produce valuable personal resources.

1. **SUFFERING PRODUCES ENDURANCE.** Suffering builds into you the capacity to cope with difficulty; the ability to draw positive rewards, new insight, new meaning, greater determination because you endured this experience drawing on Jesus Christ.

In 1902 the poetry editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* returned an envelope of poems to a twenty-eight year old poet with this curt note: "our magazine has no room for your vigorous verse." The poet was Robert Frost, who rejected the rejection. In 1905, the University of Bern rejected a Ph.D. dissertation as being irrelevant and fanciful. The young physics student who wrote the dissertation, Albert Einstein, persisted despite the rejection. In 1894, a rhetoric professor in England wrote on the sixteen-year-old's report card, "a conspicuous lack of success." The sixteen year old was Winston Churchill, who rejected the rejection and endured. When William Carey, a Christian missionary to India, first thought of going to India to serve God, his father pointed out to

him that he had no academic qualifications that would fit him for such a task. "True," Carey answered, "but I can plod."

How often God accomplishes mighty things for his kingdom through people like you and me who are willing to persevere as the Spirit enables us, who are willing to plod faithfully along, overcoming one difficulty after another in the power of the Holy Spirit!

Endurance, determination, fortitude, are formed under pressure – the pressures of sorrow, circumstances, persecution, unpopularity, loneliness, failures and set-backs. But because we have Christ in us pushing back against the world, we share a spirit that overcomes the world; we do not passively acquiesce but we actively overcome trials and tribulations and forge ahead to make something good of what we have endured. Sorrow colors life, yes, but you can choose the color!

2. SUFFERING PRODUCES ENDURANCE; ENDURANCE PRODUCES CHARACTER. As you build in your endurance, you mature. You are tested, you are proved, you are disciplined. Tough times prove the mettle in persons. Tough times can make you bitter, or make you better. Maturity equips you for life's long haul.

Some folks say life is grind...maturity says life is a grindstone. Whether it grinds you down or polishes you up depends on what you are made of. The word used for "character" in Romans 5:4 is *dokime*, the word for metal that has passed through fire to purify it. "Sterling" silver, "pure gold" is *dokime*. When you meet your afflictions with fortitude, you emerge stronger, purer, better, nearer to God.

3. CHARACTER PRODUCES HOPE, A HOPE THAT DOESN'T DISAPPOINT BECAUSE IT IS BASED IN GOD'S LOVE AND GOODNESS SHOWN IN JESUS CHRIST. You and I have hope because we have faith in Jesus Christ, because God's Spirit is implanted in our bodies! It's amazing how people seek God when times are bad, not when times are good. When life is good, when you are healthy and problem free, when there are no problems, when life is going your way, why should you need anyone else?

But when times get tough, when the bottom drops out, when life knocks the props out from under you, that's when we start looking for God. We finally see that we are not in control of our lives, that nothing is really ours at all. Everything is in God's hands. It's at this point that we begin to draw strength from our Christian hope. You and I can't handle things on our own, but we share confidence in God, who loves us and has real purpose for our lives.

Benjamin Weir, Presbyterian minister held hostage for sixteen months by Moslem extremists in Lebanon, and since then a moderator of our Presbyterian Church (USA), discovered the true power of hope during his suffering. The first fourteen months he was locked in a barren room, forbidden to see another human being. When alone he was allowed to take off his blindfold, and he would read his Bible. An electric cord dangled from the ceiling. The light fixture had been stripped out, leaving three fragile filament wires exposed. For him, they became symbols of the life-giving fingers of God reaching down toward Adam in the Sistine Chapel. Three fingers, the Trinity, Father, Son, Holy Spirit reaching down to him. The 120 slats of the closed shutters became reminders that we are "surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses." Those months of suffering were sustained by Hope.

You and I know people who live with suffering on a daily basis. Their suffering has produced endurance, and their endurance had produced character, and their character is permeated by hope. They trust God because God has seen them through thus far. Life goes on. They have walked through the darkest hours and they still go on. God leads them on, and one day they will know victory in Jesus!

Character that endures test and afflictions and disappointments and setbacks and confusion and darks nights of the soul emerge in hope. And our Christian hope is not an illusion – it is founded on *the love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit*. (Romans 5:5).

When your hope is in God – it cannot be dashed, it cannot be disappointed.
When your hope is in God - it cannot be defeated or destroyed,
Your hope is not an illusion - it is revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
Your hope is not an illusion – it is the proven testimony of millions of people through centuries of experience!
Your hope is not wishful thinking – it is anchored in the everlasting love of God, the everlasting power!

CONCLUSION

God can bring beneficial results out of our bad circumstances.
Nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord!
Sometimes what we think is the worst thing that could happen to us leads to later triumph.
But even if it doesn't, there is good news. Romans 5 tells us that even when we see no beneficial results, at least with God's help we can keep growing. God doesn't waste anything in this world, not even our troubles.

Many of the most important lessons we learned in life we learned through adversity. Lots of us made it simply by hanging in there when things got rough. We trusted God, we learned our lessons and we achieved more than we ever dreamed possible. *"We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts...."* (RSV)

Fear not, God is with you, to deliver you. Your difficulties will not defeat you. You can make it!

C. S. Lewis said that the most frequently spoken word in heaven would be, "OH." As in, "Oh, now I understand." Or, "Oh, now I see what God's plan was." Or, "Oh, now I see the reason for the trial I went through."

We don't have that luxury in this world. We walk by faith, not by knowledge. But one day it will be revealed to us. I do not understand all things, I can not explain all things, but I trust God, and that is enough. I know the love of Jesus Christ and I have experienced the power of the Holy Spirit. So, until I get to heaven and understand all things, I claim the words of the Apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 1:12: *"I know whom I have believed and I am persuaded that He is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me."*

Can you accept that and live by it? There are some answers that are too large for our little brains to contain. Our greatest need is not understanding, but trust, trust that God is with us to deliver us!

God the Father created us,
God the Son saved us,
God the Spirit sustains us.

God is with us and will be with us until that day comes when all will be revealed. Thanks be to God for the endurance, the character, the hope and the love that are ours through Jesus our Lord!

Amen!

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