

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
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Romans 5:1-5

“. . . knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, . . .” (Acts 2:5-6 N.R.S.V.)

Infers and untillers

It has grown increasingly difficult to trust people these days. Some of us are old enough to remember the evening news with Walter Cronkite. He was the main news anchor for CBS during the 1960's and 70's. He was one of the most trusted men in American because he consistently gave us the news with accuracy and without telling us what it meant or how we should think about it.

Today the various news sources are filled with political agendas, exaggerations, selective reporting, and fake news. News organizations have repeatedly broken trust with us.

It isn't just the news either. Various scams are on the rise. A few years back Jack Anderson told me about a phone call he received from someone claiming to be his grandson. Jack said the young man did sound a lot like his grandson and seemed to know a lot about the family. The caller said that he was in trouble and needed money to make bail. "Please don't tell my parents about this," the young man begged. He told Jack he needed the money wired through Western Union and he knew where the closest office was in Shinnston.

When Jack hesitated, the young man cursed. "Blankety, blank, Grandpa, just send me the money." This was a final tip off for Jack, because his grandson would not talk that way. Still the con was good enough that Jack felt the need to call his son and check on his grandson. The grandson was fine. It was just a scam.

Internet scams are also on the rise. Recently someone was sending out emails in my name. It wasn't from my actual email account, but it looked similar to my account. The emails said, "This is Pastor John. Could you do me a favor? I am tied up right now, but there is a cancer patient that needs a gift card. Could you buy such and such a card and email the numbers to me?"

The scam was convincing enough that a couple of people called me to ask if I had sent them the email. I assured them that I did not. I hope that no one was taken in by this scam. At the same time I felt angry and disappointed. What is wrong with these scammers that they would do such

things?

The trust problem is more than just scammers. Sometimes the people we know well and trust the most, let us down. Divorce is an all too common thing in our society. I haven't experienced this but many have told me about the shattering of trust. About how their love and commitment was repaid with betrayal, hurt, disappointment, and anger. These kinds of betrayals and breaking of trust leave us cynical, disillusioned, and less likely to trust in the future.

Here's the thing. Our lack of trust in people can also bleed into a lack of trust in God. It is one thing to believe there is a God and it is something entirely different thing to trust God. In our text from Romans 5, Paul talks about the peace that comes from God. In other places he speaks of the joy that comes from serving God. Many people today lack that peace and joy in their lives because they are not trusting God. Many faithful church members experience a lack of peace and joy in their lives. They may not be aware that it is a trust issue. But they are aware of the lack of peace and joy in their lives.

Dr. Ronald M. Brown, a former professor at the University of Minnesota contends that we need to recognize two categories of trust. One that deals with God and one that deals with people. (Dynamic Preaching, June 2022, pg. 35)

In human relationships our trust is conditional. Brown talks about people being "Iffers" and "Untillers." We may not say this out loud but we all have a list of expectations that others must meet in order to be trusted. I will trust you if you are consistent, if you are honest, if you don't exaggerate. In addition there are usually the until conditions. I will trust you until you lie to me. I will trust you until you have an affair or are unfaithful. I will trust you until you betray our secrets.

Different people have different "if expectations" and different "until expectations." Some of them are more healthy than others. But what I really want to talk to you about is our "if" and "until" criteria for trusting God.

Many people say to God, "I will trust you if you answer my prayers the way I want. I will trust you God, if you will cure my illness. I will trust you, God, if you fix my problems."

Or again, "I will trust you God until you let something bad happen in my life. I will trust you God until you ask me to do something inconvenient and life changing. I will trust you God until you cost me the respect of my family and friends."

Do you hear me? I suspect that most of us don't say that out loud, but it is still there. The most difficult time is when we are suffering for no apparent reason. At times like that we are apt to ask, "How could a good God who is all powerful and who loves me, allow this bad thing to happen to me?"

I have some partial answers as to why bad things happen to good people. But I have never found

a truly complete answer. All I know is that bad things do happen to good people. And that when they do, it does not mean that God is mad at us or that God has abandoned us.

The Apostle Paul was somewhat of an expert on suffering. He gave up his good life as a well-respected pharisee to follow Jesus Christ. He traveled in poverty. He endured shipwrecks, beatings, stoning, and imprisonment. He was often hated and reviled by the leading elements of his society. Yet, he could talk about the peace and joy that comes from serving Christ.

Listen to his words again. “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. 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.”

We were talking about this concept in Bible Study last Thursday night. Someone pointed out that reading these words to someone who is suffering might not be all that comforting. Can you imagine saying to someone who is fighting terminal cancer, “Hey, look. Suffering is good. Suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character, and character, hope. Feel better now?”

So what did Paul mean? He, was as I said, an expert on the subject of suffering.

Let me lift out a few things. For Paul, his trust in God was not conditional. He discovered a peace and joy that the world did not give him and circumstances in the world could not take away from him. When we are faced with suffering, we are faced with a choice. We can choose to believe that the suffering we are enduring means that God is untrustworthy. Or we can choose to continue to trust God in spite of these bad things. We can choose to believe that God will help us through these bad times. We can choose to believe that these bad times will not have the last word.

Paul also found that God can bring good out of even the worse things that happen to us. The bad things were still bad. But Paul did not allow the bad things to define his reality. God defined his reality.

One of my favorite verses is found a few chapters later in Paul’s letter to the Romans. “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

This does not mean that the good that God brings out of the bad things that happen will outweigh the bad things. It doesn’t work like that. What I am saying is that even the worst things can be used for some good in the hands of God.

Paul found that his faith was made stronger by the suffering that he endured. This is not true for everyone. Some people lose faith and become embittered because of suffering. But those who chose to continue to trust God, will find their faith strengthened.

Think about someone you know who is spiritually wise. Now ask yourself how they got that way. Those I trust to be spiritually wise have all gone through deep suffering. That wisdom was gained at a price.

I find that these spiritually wise people also have a deep sense of peace and joy in the Lord. That is what Paul is talking about.

Paul was also convinced that the grace and love of Christ would never abandon him. That was a large part of Paul's sense of courage and purpose.

Paul writes in chapter 8:35 ff of Romans, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Though I have not endured great suffering, everyone endures some suffering in life. From personal experience I can tell you that it is sometimes hard to see God's presence and activity when we are in the midst of bad experiences. It is only later looking back that we can see more clearly all the ways that God was helping us and supporting us through those dark times. So each time we come through suffering by trusting God, we emerge a little stronger in faith.

Do you desire to know the peace and joy of the Lord? Then choose to make your trust in God unconditional. Let there be no "iffers" and "untillers" in your faith. For God is good all of the time. All of the time, God is good.

Amen.