

¹Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and 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.

⁶For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. ⁸But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. ⁹Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. ¹¹But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

The word of the Lord!

Thanks be to God!

I was looking at that list quite often this past week, that list that seemed to grow not just by the day, but the hour. All these places that shut down, perhaps, out of fear, desperation, “better be safe than sorry” mindsets, maybe even to just avoid potential PR disasters and lawsuits galore. Now, I may have been focused on the church closings list, but there were others that received much more significant attention from the general public (I'll be willing to admit that out loud). For starters, the St. Patrick's Day Parade? A rather big deal...if you're into that kind of thing. Sarah was more disappointed about Dyngus Day (with her Polish background): again...if you're into that kind of thing. But, to be honest, I was more captivated; no, *shocked*, by something else, more so than neighboring churches deciding to hold worship or not. It was, and still is, the NCAA men's college basketball tournament.

Yes, I know, it really isn't *that* big of a deal in the grand scheme of things: not just in terms of people's lives being taken away by a silent/invisible-to-the-eye virus, but in comparison to schools closing and parents working jobs that cannot be done from home, or college students being told to leave their on-campus housing with little money to return home hundreds of miles away, and plenty of other *much more* significant circumstances. Nevertheless, all that mature and humanely/spiritually-advanced thinking doesn't always arrive on the mental scene of initial reactions.

You see, back in middle school, I might have been the first “bookie” in our class, printing up all these tournament brackets for friends and, quite honestly, people I didn't really hang out with at all (their money was as good as anyone else's though!), to fill out in a few days' time after the teams were selected that Sunday night before the games commenced Thursday at noon. At \$5/person, whomever would have the most accurate picks of winners throughout, what they still call “March Madness,” would win all the money (well, second place may have gotten their money back for integrity's sake...or something).

But, it wasn't just about that. I can tell you about memories of us being in the high school library when a buzzer-beater shot was made. I could go into how close one of my friends came to

shattering another friend's dad's chair, when one of his Final Four teams got upset by some community college-equivalent opponent. Every year we still fill out those brackets online (not for money anymore, just for pride...or something), and we have our usual banter through message boards and text messages as Davids slay Goliaths and plenty more drama ensues in stadiums across the country.

But, it's not just that either. Every once in a while, a story emerges that transcends the game itself: a story that puts all us fans (short for *fanatics*, of course) in our reality-check place, and brings humanity front-and-center, where it still belongs. One such story would have been retold this year in the 2020 rendition of the NCAA men's basketball tournament. One such story not only will the basketball fans miss out on, but many, many more, who need to hear such hope in spite of suffering.

Thirty years ago, this March, Loyola Marymount University was in the midst of dominance on the sport with one of the greatest offenses college basketball had ever seen. Leading the charge was a young man, named Hank Gathers, with incredible brute strength, standing at 6'7" tall. He had become the nation's top scorer and rebounder that season (for those who may not be overly familiar with the statistics of the game: just know this hardly ever happens).

Then, in their conference tournament semifinal round, about a week before the big dance for the nation would commence, Loyola Marymount was facing off against the University of Portland in front of a packed house at Loyola's home Gersten Pavilion. Seven minutes into that game, Hank Gathers was on the receiving end of a long pass before finishing it off with one of his classic dunks, before retreating to the other end of the court to get ready to play defense. Instead, Gathers started to stagger as he crossed mid-court, and he collapsed. He tried to get up, saying "I don't want to lay down," but stopped breathing, instead. He would be pronounced dead at a nearby hospital soon thereafter. He was 23 years young.

There is plenty of backstory to Hank Gathers, including that he had collapsed only months before, during another game, when it was concluded that he had an irregular heartbeat. And after his death from a heart-muscle disorder, rumors swirled about the university, the coach, the doctors, resulting in the school and the cardiologist settling with the family, out of court, for over \$2 million combined. Except, behind it all, was Hank's six-year-old son, Aaron, who did not get to know his father nearly enough. At age 18, Aaron would receive *his* portion of the legal settlements, but that money would quickly dissipate as it was squandered on a house, a Cadillac Escalade, with no plans for what he wanted to do with his life. Aaron would fall into the wrong crowd and ended up shooting a drug dealer in the back. The man survived, but Aaron would be sent to a state prison for five years for aggravated assault with a deadly weapon.

Fast forward to earlier this month: a statue was unveiled of Hank Gathers just outside the same stadium that was once filled to the rafters with fans desperately wanting to see his thunderous dunks. Amongst the crowd, that day, was his son, Aaron, who now works at a community development center, as well as coaching for a basketball program to serve as a mentor for high-risk adolescents. However, looking at his father's bronze statue, he was in tears, wondering if his father would be proud of him in spite of his rather checkered past, to say the least. Aaron's mom would say, "Who could be more proud of the fact that you fell down and you learned from your fall? You came out of that and look what you're doing...yeah, he['s] proud of you."

Yes, every once in a while a story emerges, not just from a basketball court, or right outside an arena, but beyond: stories of hope emerging out of suffering. However, there is always a part of me that cringes when Paul's "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces

character, and character produces hope” gets trotted out, because plenty of people know from first-hand experience that not all suffering does produce endurance, then character, then hope. That isn’t the case for far too many families whose loved one has died because of this coronavirus whether that be in our own country, China, Italy: all places with people God loves just as much as the rest. Nevertheless, we hope that out of this suffering in whatever form (actual infection, fear, lack of connection with people we care about, etc.) can, in due time, bring about endurance with each other’s help, character in keeping our joint-humanity in perspective, and hope that Resurrection is a still-daily ministry, even in the season of Lent.

However, during this season of Lent, the cross gets pushed even more front-and-center than it already is in our relationship with God, our worship focus, our daily prayer life. It is the cross that shows us that God is with us in our suffering, regardless of how we react, how long it may take us to recover, even when we feel we have lost hope not only for our own lives, but losing hope over the world. Christ will reveal to us yet again that that cross was meant for this whole world, no matter the level of panic, no matter the level of fear, no matter how many times we ask, “Where is God!?!?”

Even if through whatever suffering, we do not feel hope, it will not change God’s love for us. God is not waiting for us at the end of whatever journey we take to move through suffering into endurance into character into hope. Christ remains with us throughout every day, every hour, every minute, no matter how long we stay in whatever emotion. And even if we find ourselves looking at a cross, wondering if God can be proud of us not just for how we are acting now, but for a not-perfect past. Rest assured, Aaron’s mom’s words apply as the Gospel, too: “Yeah, God is proud of you.” May not always make much sense to us at various points in our life, but for the One who took up that cross for this whole world, and would do it all over again, this grace doesn’t make much sense at all. And for that Greatest News that still remains, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!

Finally, I leave you with a hymn you may watch/listen to, as you wish. It is “Seed That in Earth Is Dying” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* Hymn 330). The imagery is meant more so for Holy Communion, but I wonder if we can apply it to our current circumstances. Perhaps we need to “die” to our conveniences, our understandings of how the church as the body of Christ can operate in the 21st century, “die” to our obsession over self. Perhaps, in such “dying,” we can “rise to bear much fruit.” And we most certainly pray that through this rather mysterious time, of sorts, that “God...grant us faith in our deepest darkness, life in our night and death.” Amen (so let it be)!

Seed that in earth is dying
grows into ears of grain.
Grapes that are crushed in the vessel
turn into golden wine.
God, through this mystery grant us
faith in our deepest darkness,
life in our night and death.

We were baptized in Jesus,
into his death and grave,
to resurrection's promise:
praise and eternal life.
Heaven's own praises begin here
where you yourself are near us,
deep in our night and death.

Seed that in earth is dying
rises to bear much fruit.
Christ, as we meet at your table,
give us the bread of life.
Lord, we do thank and adore you!
Unceasing praise of the ages
rises from night and death.

[Seed That in Earth Is Dying from Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church \(Worcester, MA\): Nov. 25, 2011](#)