

“Imprint”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Romans 5:1-11

August 18, 2019 - Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Our Epistle reading — “epistle” is just a snazzy church word for “letter.” — comes from Paul’s letter to the Romans. Paul was a persecutor of the early church until he had a miraculous encounter with the risen Jesus. Then, with the fervor of a convert, he went about spreading the Gospel into the Greco-Roman world, establishing churches and then writing letters to them to help them figure things out. But the church in Rome wasn’t one that Paul had founded. He is planning to make his way there, but in the meantime writes to them to help them work on the relationship between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians as they seek to follow Christ together.

Paul has spent the first four chapters of this letter explaining that through nothing we can do, but through trusting in God alone, we are welcomed into God’s family. We are welcomed despite our shortcomings and despite God’s deep hunger for justice. We can’t do anything about it. It’s God’s work, through Jesus, to act in such overwhelming grace. We are made righteous by God — given God’s very shape and character — so that we might be transformed. And at the beginning of chapter five, we begin to hear what that life of transformation looks like.

Listen for God’s Word from the Epistle to the Romans:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but 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.

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

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Moo. That’s the name of the website from which I got new business cards this week. I hadn’t ordered cards since my first week here five years ago, and I thought long and hard about how these new ones might look different. In June, a protestor at the Central Alabama Pride Parade told me I was a wolf in sheep’s clothing that was leading you all on a path to damnation, but I would have had to pay extra for that much text.

As I fiddled with the templates I thought about the Great Business Card Prank of 2014. It was an

evening in late June, my very last night on-call as a chaplain at Children's of Alabama. I took a break for dinner and thankfully the pager cooperated. I'd been cleaning out my desk for the past week and had found a box of about three hundred of my chaplain business cards. In less than forty-eight hours these cards would be completely useless, so I decided they needed to go out with a flourish.

I spent the next twenty minutes hiding these cards in every place I could think of in the Pastoral Care office. They went behind books in our library and into hidden compartments in the copier. They went under plants and into the shirts of stuffed animals. They went into the page-a-day calendars of my colleagues, and into their Bibles and employee manuals and drawers filled with candy that they thought nobody knew about. I even taped a few to the ceiling tiles, which took a surprisingly long time for those chaplains to find. I guess they don't look up when they pray.

It was my way of saying "I love y'all" and "a part of me will always be here" and "I will haunt your dreams." Three months later I was installed as Edgewood's pastor in a spectacular Sunday afternoon service, and the chaplains got their revenge. Just seven or eight weeks ago I found a business card for one of those chaplains in a box of candles in the sacristy. And then they found one of mine in a file cabinet.

I remember giving out those cards when "pediatric chaplain" was my job title, my identity, my vocation. When you tell someone you work at Children's, at least sixty percent of the time they say something like "I couldn't do that. I couldn't handle the suffering."

And I wanted to say, "Yes. You could. If you had to, you could." I never responded that way, but maybe I should have. I wanted to say, "Every single day people who had no plans to ever enter that building find themselves there. Parents and grandparents and siblings and the kids themselves. And most of them think they can't do it. But they do."

You could do it. You could handle it. It might be incredibly difficult, and maybe for a really long time. It might change you. It might bring you to the brink of exhaustion and breaking. I fervently hope that you never have to, but you could. You could, because if there's one thing that I know for certain after more than a dozen years of pastoring, it's that people are resilient.

Resilience is in your DNA. It's imprinted on your soul, right next to your sense of humor. Or, if you lack one of those, the part of your soul that likes the smell of coffee. It is part of who you are so much more than your job title or anything else you might put on a business card.

"...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."

Paul writes that we "boast in our sufferings" and I want to be clear that he's not suggesting that we go around looking for suffering to wrap ourselves in so that we can boast for Jesus. I think he's saying that even in our inevitable suffering in this world we can find meaning and we can find God right there with us and we can say, "Hey you guys! I'm not alone, even in this, the unimaginable."

It's always terrifically tricky to talk about suffering and the response to it, because we have to be abundantly clear that we're not telling anyone how they need to find meaning in their suffering. The message is emphatically not "Always look on the bright side of life!" It's crucial to remember that Paul says "we" not "you." We can walk with another in their suffering. We can offer help and insight if

invited. But we can't impose our own fixes on someone else's reality, trying to repair them or to soften the sharp edges of their suffering or tell them, unbidden, how to cope. The suffering of one we love can be unbearable, but if we trust in resilience and God's Spirit, we won't do the damage of trying to stifle the emotions that come with suffering.

Late-night funnyman Stephen Colbert is the youngest of eleven kids. The oldest eight were off living adult lives when next two youngest — brothers Peter and Paul — were killed in a plane crash, along with ten-year-old Stephen's father. When asked how he can be one of the most grounded and joy-filled people on television after that kind of loss, he replies, "...the answer is: my mother...the world, it's so lovely...I'm very grateful to be alive, even though I know a lot of dead people...my context for my existence is that I am here to know God, love God, serve God...I got that from my mom. And my dad. And my siblings."

As my friend the Rev. MaryAnn McKibben Dana, says, "my favorite Colbert is Catholic Colbert, followed shortly by Tolkien Nerd Colbert."

Stephen Colbert talks about finding gratitude amid suffering: "It would be ungrateful not to take everything with gratitude. It doesn't mean you want it. I can hold both of those ideas in my head...It's that I love the thing that I most wish had not happened."¹

...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.

Stephen Colbert has found his way through that maddening, awful, beautiful maze that Paul knows and describes. Again, his way through is not a prescription, but a testimony to resilience. At our own pace, maybe with some help, we who are made in the image of God can find a path to meaning, in our loss and our grief and our fear and our dread.

When a relationship is lost or a beloved one dies or some other shock to our sense of balance sends us reeling, wounds are opened. I know you know these wounds. They can't be patched by smiles and determination and tidy platitudes. But they can find healing — healing that might hurt and might itch and might need to make you numb for a bit — and this healing is imprinted on our souls and is activated like yeast in the souls of those who also know suffering and they seem to show up when needed.

Did you hear about the funeral for Margie Reckard? She was killed last week, along with twenty-one others, in El Paso. The funeral home where Margie's service was to be held posted on Facebook: "Mr. Antonio Basco was Married for 22 yrs to his wife Margie Reckard, He had no other family. He welcomes anyone to attend his Wife's services."

By the hundreds they came, the flowers first, and then the strangers. The funeral had to be moved to a larger venue. For several hours on Friday a line of people spanned several blocks. Even after it became clear they wouldn't get in for the service, they waited in the summer heat to greet Antonio and to hug him and to tell him that he was not alone.²

¹ "The Late, Great Stephen Colbert" in *GQ*, August 17, 2015, at <https://www.gq.com/story/stephen-colbert-gq-cover-story>

² <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/17/752006060/el-paso-shooting-hundreds-of-strangers-come-to-mourn-with-widower-at-wifes-funer>

We proclaim a God who suffers with us.

We know that God's presence doesn't mean the absence of suffering, but rather that God is with us in the moments of deepest wounding, fully able to bear our anger and confusion and fear and doubt and cursing and exhaustion.

And we proclaim a God who doesn't suffer with us vicariously, munching popcorn and tearing up, but a God who throws God's very self into the actual pain. It's who God is. It's on God's business card, which is simply a cross.

This cross is imprinted on us and our world — the reality of being creatures made of matter who matter to one another and therefore hurt when bodies decay and violence erupts and we must do the unimaginable.

We do that together, under the grace of a God who goes beyond the suffering — not erasing it, but transforming it — in hope, in love, in resilience, in resurrection.

This truth binds our souls together. This truth sees us through.

Suffering is real and palpable and painful and punchable.

The world is vast and can feel arbitrary and cruel and indifferent.

Our God knows this and breaks open with us.

And the people of God gather and share a grace

that breaks out in song,

that catches our words in our chests,

that finds us when we are lost,

and leads us home.

Amen.