

Call to Worship*

L/ Jesus Christ summons us to answer God’s call of mercy.

P/ Christ gathers us and gives us power to be healed and to heal,

L/ to be forgiven and to forgive,

**P/ to be free from sin and to set others free, to tell one another
and the world:**

All/ God’s presence is at hand. Let us worship God!

Opening Hymn*.....#65

(vss 1,2,4)

“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”

Opening Prayer

God of awesome and infinite wonder, reveal your fullness to us this day, the fullness in your Son Jesus Christ. We are your people. Fill us with hope and peace that the cross of Jesus set free for us. Gather us as Jesus’ faithful disciples and empower us with his good news and Paul’s confident hope through the word and work of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Passing of the Peace

Pastoral Prayer

O God in the stillness of this beautiful morning, we set before you the fears, uncertainties, and unrest within us, and in the world. Attend to our troubled hearts and minds, we pray.

We pray for justice. We pray for those victimized by injustice.

We pray for peace. We pray all those whose circumstances in life make peace a faint hope.

We pray for the courage to be, to live authentic lives. We pray for those whose lives our controlled by fear; fear of authorities, fear of unemployment, fear of death, fear of being unloved or left all alone, fear of loss, fear of others, fear of failure, and the fear of living into the true, the good, and the beautiful as call us to live, O God.

We pray, O God, for all within our heart in need of your healing and comforting touch, especially we pray for Bonnie Abell, all those on our prayer list, and all those we hold dear in our hearts.

We give you our heart felt thanks and praise, O God, for this church and these people with whom we journey in faith into the deeper recesses of your love and truth. For there we find our own ways to be instruments of your justice, peace, hope and courage in our community and world.

Hear us, O God, as we pray together Jesus' prayer,

The Lord's Prayer. Amen.

Scripture Reading (Romans 5:1-8)

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.

Morning Message

In Paul's day, the middle of the first century, being a Christian was a dangerous enterprise. Caesar was Lord. That is not news to any of us.

To be caught publicly proclaiming anyone Lord, but Caesar, carried significant consequence, even the possibility of a death sentence.

Those early Christians had to hide from the Roman authorities as they lived and shared God's good news in Jesus Christ. As we learned in our study of 1st Corinthians in Sunday school, the early church was actually made up of many small gatherings of people that met in house churches, often in the homes of the more affluent Christians. In Rome, the early Christians often sought the secret safety of the catacombs, an underground system of tombs beneath the Appian Way. To protect their identity and locations they developed secret symbols, like the fish, and

would use code-words. This is how they remained hidden from the Roman authorities.

That was the cultural context of those early believers to whom Paul wrote his letters. So, Paul begins our reading this morning with words of encouragement to what was surely anxious gatherings of people, who would tense up with each knock on the door or at the sound of soldiers marching down the roadways. Paul knew fear was the mortal enemy of faith. He had to alleviate their fears for faith to blossom in the people.

So he begins, “Since we are justified by faith we have peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ.”

As we know from a recent message, to be justified by faith means that we have aligned our lives with the way of life Jesus taught and modeled. - our principles, our priorities, our values, our relationships, our world views, our expanding capacity to love, forgive, and accept others, are all a reflection of the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. In return, we are gifted the peace of Christ that passes all understanding, a peace that can only come from God.

Paul is offering the Roman Christians, small communities made up of Jews, gentiles, men, women, rich, poor, slaves and free, a healthy dose of reassurance that God was with them.

“Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine, O what a foretaste of glory divine...” would easily capture Paul’s intent for writing his letter to the Christians in Rome. That is the kind of reassurance Paul conveys to us, too.

And, because they genuinely trusted that God was with them, they could genuinely boast in the hope of sharing the glory of God....which inspired and encouraged them to actually do the unthinkable, *boast* in their suffering - to stare down and drive away fear, the fear of their oppressors, the fear of death - by standing firm in their confession that Jesus is Lord. Caesar, merely a pretender. Paul’s words were meant to embolden this Roman gathering of diverse Christians to face the hostile world around them - and, to embolden all subsequent readers of Paul’s words, too.

Today, we don’t live under Roman rule, but we do live with just as ruthless a deadly power as those early Christians faced with the threat the

COVID-19 coronavirus poses. Over 115,000 deaths in the last four months in the US alone. Face masks, social distancing, and regular hand washing act like our modern day code-words and secret symbols that allow us to hide from, and hopefully defeat, this modern day threat. Even a virus can manifest the characteristics of a despot.

Eventually, despotism, whether human or viral, if unleashed on a large enough scale, causes us all to suffer. We are witnessing and experiencing deep suffering today on several fronts.

Those early Christians did not suffer along. Nor should we for Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 12:26-27

“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. (For) you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

There is no way to know to how many early Christians died for their faith at the hands of the Romans between the time of Jesus and the Emperor Constantine, a period of about 300 years. But we do know that it was nowhere near the over 115,000 COVID-19 related deaths in the past four months.

World-wide, we are all suffering under the current threat the pandemic poses to life and to our way of life. It seems suffering is a universal constant for every generation.

So, Paul reminds us that for those who live the justified life through their faith in Jesus Christ, suffering is not the real issue. We all suffer. The key is how we respond to our suffering.

Paul shows us the way.

“...we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance” What Paul is trying to tell us is that the more we suffer for living the justified life, the greater capacity we have to suffer even more for our faith. That is the most powerful witness to God’s power and presence in the world and in us.

Have you ever started a new exercise regimen? Do you remember the pain in your side when bent over, hands on your knees, trying to catch your

breath? Or the sore muscles the next day that almost kept you from getting out of bed? To go from out of shape to in shape requires a lot of suffering, at least early on. But your body adapts. Your muscles get stronger, getting out of breath takes longer and catching your breath takes less time. In a few weeks you move from suffering to increased endurance. That was the point Paul is making, but instead of developing the skill to put a basketball through a hoop, you are boasting in your deepening relationship with God.

When I was a freshman in high school, I played center on the freshman basketball team. Early in the season there was about a two-week stretch of practice when I could do nothing right in the eyes of the coach. Mr. Gorrell, our coach, rode me constantly, singled me out in practice over and over again. In those days, everyone called me Alex. So, it was “Ale, do this!” Alex, don’t do that.” “Alex, repeat over and over again until you get it right.” I finally got to the breaking point, mustered my courage and approached Coach Gorrell after practice. “Mr. Gorrell, I said somewhat hesitantly, “Why are you always picking on me so much in practice? It seems I can’t do anything right for you.” Coach Gorrell put his hand on my shoulder, looked me in the eyes, and said, “Alex, it’s not when I am getting on you that you need to worry about. It’s when I stop.” He patted me on my back, told me to hit the showers, and walked away.

“and endurance produces character.” After that encounter, my endurance for suffering at Coach Gorrell’s hands grew by leaps and bounds, but more importantly, that day my endurance began to produce character in me as a young adult.

That was 53 years ago and I can still remember that moment like it was yesterday.

And finally, Paul says, character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

I know you all have a story to tell about how suffering led to endurance, then to character, and then to hope in your life, too.

I hoped to be a really good basketball player as I endured the pain of those practices and a coach’s constructive criticism. It turned out that was

not to be lost in life. But, the character building of that encounter and the remainder of that season gave me all I needed to accept that truth about myself - it gave me the courage to pursue life, to test other possibilities until what was right found me. I was 26 when I heard my call to ministry,

Without the suffering that produced endurance, and endurance that produced character, and the character that produced hope, - all molded into a willingness to see life as an adventure, with all its ups and downs, and the determination to learn from each failure, I don't think I ever would have heard my call from God.

There is more, the real beauty of Paul's four-fold journey is that one is never too old to learn this life lesson - whenever we suffer and for whatever causes the suffering, we are given the choice in how we will respond. Even on one's death bed, the choice can be made to boast in your sufferings and circumstances as a follower of Jesus Christ.

You can also choose to be afraid, bitter, vengeful, angry, full of spite - they are all choices available to us, too, and probably are the most often chosen.

Paul is reminding those early Christians and us that we can trust God. We can choose to follow Jesus on the pathway that ends in a hope that will never disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." As a gift. An act of pure grace and love to conquer all fear through as a people justified by our faith.

We all suffer, friends. Some of it is unique to our circumstances. Some of it we do together, like when the world is under siege by an invisible enemy. The key is how we respond. That's the world is watching. Will having the faith of Jesus Christ make any difference in our lives? Will our choices set us apart from the rest of the world? If the answer to these questions is a visible "yes" we will have much to boast about through our sufferings. Jesus paved that path, gave us the map to follow, so we would know the way that blesses us and the world around us. Amen.

Hymn of Invitation*#614
“I’m Gonna Live So God Can Use Me”

The Lord’s Supper for All

Call to Communion.....Greg Alexander
Communion Hymn*#425
“Let Us Break Bread Together”

Celebration of the Lord’s Supper

*Words of Institution**Greg Alexander

Prayer for the Bread and Cup

Partaking of the Lord’s Supper

(please take this time for personal prayer and eat and drink as you feel so led)

Doxology

Offering Prayer

Thank you for being God with us. Thank you for keeping your promises to our faith ancestors and to us. Thank you for coming near to us in your Son, Jesus Christ. Thank you for hope that brings life through the inpouring of your Holy Spirit. Thank you for the love you hold up before the world on the cross of Christ our Savior. Even our offerings come from the fruits of your blessings. Praise to you, O Holy God! Glory to your name, O God Most High! Amen.

Benediction