

18 June 2023—3rd Sunday after Pentecost: Romans 5:1-8 (Proper 6)

From today's 2nd Reading: *...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* (3b-5).

Of all the revolutionary words in the New Testament, these are among the most radical and subversive. The widely held assumption among ancient peoples is that human suffering is caused either by the gods' capricious naughtiness, human moral failing, or 'fate,' being at the mercy of anonymous, uncaring forces. Christians were villainized, in part, because they were profoundly, militantly counter-cultural: not fanatical in appearance, not extreme politically, not arcanelly moral. Our early Christian mothers and fathers came to believe in a Divine Being and a vision of human personhood utterly contrary to pagan assumptions. This is a perennial truth: if you want to be an object of scorn and hostility challenge the reigning assumptions of the culture.

Our culture's assumed assumptions are not about the gods' impulsive mischief. However, there are many who believe 'if I'm good only good things should happen to me and mine,' and helplessness in the face of an uncaring universe. Our deepest cultural assumptions are different. The two most obvious are that we can buy our way to happiness, and closely related, what I would call the myth of 'self-fulfillment.' If we are true to ourselves, believe in ourselves—all will be well. Both happiness through acquisition and unflinching belief in oneself are attractive, both are relentlessly promoted in the media. If we question these assumptions, we might not buy their gobs of junk promising self-fulfillment. There is something cosy about our prevalent cultural assumptions. If nothing else they give the illusion we are, or can be, our own masters.

One hundred fifteen years ago, the Christian Apologist, G.K. Chesterton wrote a book entitled, "Orthodoxy." Chesterton relates an encounter in which someone compliments a mutual friend, saying, "That man will get on; he believes in himself." In part Chesterton responds: "Shall I tell you where the (people) are who believe most in themselves...believe in themselves more colossally than Napoleon or Caesar(?)...(Those) who really believe in themselves are all in lunatic asylums...complete self-confidence is not merely a sin...(it) is a weakness...a hysterical and superstitious belief...". It is a frightening truth: those who most ardently believe in themselves are out of touch with the reality of everything else, including themselves.

There is a revolutionary, radical quality to Christianity, especially early Christians, who rejected all pagan assumptions about God and human beings. While fulfillment and happiness are experienced within a person, their source is outside the person. We are not in pursuit of self-fulfillment, but of being filled with what is beyond oneself. What is most beyond oneself is God. The way of fulfillment is not acquisition but serving others—God, our neighbor, even strangers. Paul's words quoted at the beginning: *...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*, make sense only if we live beyond our cramped narcissism. Notice how Paul's ends the sentence about suffering producing endurance producing character producing hope: *through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us*. Maturity is a gift we receive from God through the Holy Spirit as we live in Christ as ready vessels of God's grace.

Paul gives us a sign of confirmation that we are living such a life. He writes: *...we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.*" Notice the word is 'boast,' not brag; some translations have 'rejoice' or 'exult.' Whatever the translation, the point is clear. True fulfillment is the result of loving and serving God, loving and serving others, producing joy bursting out because in Jesus Christ we have received reconciliation. The verb is passive: we have received reconciliation from God, freely given. We cannot buy or barter it. We are forgiven for the asking, made co-heirs with Christ, for love's sake. We enter more deeply into Christ's reconciliation as we share his grace, regardless of cost to ourselves, knowing that sharing God's grace prepares us to receive yet more grace, producing endurance, character, and hope. We burst forth, sharing yet more love, reconciliation, and hope. Our fulfillment is living in, through and for Christ. Indeed, joy is the distinguishing mark of Christians.

Be counter-cultural: receive joy; share joy; freely receive, freely give so everyone, through Christ in you, knows such joy.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and for ever. Amen.