**June 25, 2023 Romans 5:1-8**

***Character***

**Scripture:** Romans 5:1-8 NRSV

*(1)Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, (2)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. (3)And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, (4)and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, (5)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. (6)For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. (7)Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person--though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. (8)But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*

**Notes:**

1. Where do we begin, to become people of ***character***?
   1. “***suffering*** is today’s forgotten value”
   2. “***boast*** in our sufferings”
   3. We don’t want to ***avoid*** suffering ourselves; we want our ***children*** to live without distress also.
2. The Apostle Paul knew something about ***suffering***.
   1. When the going gets a little tough, some find that ***flight*** is preferable to ***fight***,
   2. “Suffering produces ***endurance***.”
   3. Training doesn’t last for a couple of weeks, it takes ***commitment***.
3. Character is: it is doing the right thing ***naturally***,
   1. People who ***consistently*** make good decisions are people of character.
   2. The pain of the past is the greatest ***teacher*** for our future.
4. ***Surround*** yourself with people of character.
   1. “…suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character…and character produces ***hope***….”
   2. For Paul, the word hope meant ***certainty***.
   3. Paul says that character leads to ***confidence***.
   4. When we are people of character, what we think, or say, or do will simply be extensions of who we are, ***children*** of ***God***.

**Script:**

I have a question I want you to ponder for the next few minutes. The question is this: What would you be willing to do for a million dollars? For one million in cold cash, what deed or act would you be willing to do? That is a question I pondered myself at one time in my life. Where in my life was the value of cash higher than my need to be a respectable person. I remember contemplating this when a movie was released in the 90’s named Indecent Proposal. In the movie, a wealthy man offers a couple that he had just met a million dollars to spend the night with the woman. The movie presented all kinds of philosophical questions to which I concluded a person’s character is more valuable than all of the money in the world.

Around the same time as this movie, a book was published that asked a similar question. The book was entitled The Day America Told the Truth by James Patterson and Peter Kim, and their question was this: “What are you honestly willing to do for 10 million dollars?” I think you will find the answers both interesting as well as disturbing. What would people do for 10 million dollars?

· 25% said they would abandon their entire family  
· 25% said they would abandon their church  
· 23% said they would become prostitutes for a week or more, and  
· 7% would kill a stranger (1)

There are roughly 80 people attending services here on average so that would break down to roughly 6 people who are dangerous, and 20 for each of the previously mentioned categories. I can’t say that this is encouraging; but the numbers dropped considerably when the payoff dropped to 2 million. However, the statistics remained the same above that number. So that brings to mind the question, “Is there a character crisis in this country?” Since the release of the movie and the book, we have seen personal character compromised at the highest level of our government; we have seen integrity compromised in leadership of the church, and in spite of all the rhetoric about “family values” we have seen the fabric of the family erode even further. Colin Powell once defined character as being “the way we live our lives when nobody else is watching.” If character is in short supply among us today, how can it be restored? How can we become a people of character in the 21st century?

How can we become a people of character? What’s the road map? The Apostle Paul offers us the equation in our sermon passage for today, and it’s worthy of our attention on a summer Sunday morning. This is what Paul writes:

(1)Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, (2)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. (3)And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, (4)and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, (5)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. (6)For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. (7)Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person--though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. (8)But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Romans 5:1-8 NRSV

First let me say that I think that the poll’s calculations are based on everybody responding that they would do something for that sum of money. But what about the people who refuse to respond because there is nothing that would tempt them to deny their own character for any sum of money? Was their voice heard? And, how can we develop our character to be like that, a character just like that of Jesus. Where do we begin, as we seek to become people of character? Paul says we begin by looking at how we perceive suffering. Pastor Leith Andersen says that “suffering is today’s forgotten value” and he may be right. Who wants to suffer in this life? What’s the value in it? Why would we, as Paul says “boast in our sufferings” when we spend much of our time and our money and our energy trying to avoid suffering?

Now, there are certain times in our lives when we are willing to endure periods of suffering and pain, and sometimes we do so happily. Women in childbirth, for example, or athletes training their bodies for a competition, or missionaries volunteering to serve in Third World countries, or military personnel volunteering to serve in harm’s way; these would be examples of suffering by choice.

But most of us flee from every sort of hardship. We don’t want to wait more than a minute for a meal, so we invented microwaves. We don’t want to wait until we have saved to buy things, so we simply put it on our credit cards. We don’t want to endure the pain of conflict and controversy, so we put away our unpopular opinions and positions and “go with the flow” we go with what the popular culture says like, “My Body, my Choice,” or “I can be of any sexual orientation that I choose to be”. The cliché “no pain, no gain” is from our grandparents’ culture. Watch television for an hour and see how many times you are invited to embrace things that are quick, easy and painless.

And we don’t just want to avoid suffering for ourselves; we who are parents want our children to live without distress as well. So, when our children face challenging situations, we look for ways to ease their burdens for them. When they are faced with consequences of their poor choices, we do what we can to defend them and we look for ways to excuse them or lighten their load. I have read students as young as first grade turn in homework assignments that were actually completed by their parents. If it starts at age six, then when does it really end? I have even received calls and notes when I was teaching saying that the assignment that I had given was too demanding and too stressful for their child. The truth be told, the student put it off to the last minute and was not able to get it done in adequate time and turned to the parent for help who did not understand the instructions.

I read this week of a doctor in Iowa who was very successful and very wealthy. He told a friend that the friend was lucky he didn’t have a lot of money. He went on, “When your kids ask you for things, you can honestly tell them you can’t afford it.” He said, “When my kids ask me for things, they know that I can afford it, so I have to come up with another reason.” His friend being a young father did not appreciate the comment; but the comment is something that each of us may come to appreciate. I can remember when my kids would come to me with requests for things that I didn't think were wise purchases. The boys would say that we were being mean and that all of their friends had these things. I understand that many parents buy things for their children just because they ask. But I shared with my boys that at that point in their life I did not think that what they were asking for was something that was necessary or required. You see, things that come too easy to us are, in the long run, not good for us and in many cases unappreciated. The wait, the struggle, and maybe even the suffering that we endure when attaining our desires, tend to give greater value to the things we receive and build our character.

The Apostle Paul knew something about suffering. He was shipwrecked twice. He was imprisoned twice. He was beaten, abandoned by his friends, and disowned by his family. But through all of this he learned that his suffering produced within him an endurance to survive other situations that would come his way. Late in his life, Paul was not deterred by conflict and criticism, because he was a survivor of trials in the early days.

I cannot say that endurance is one of our strong suits. Many change vehicles and many change houses with regularity. But we also jump from job to another with regularity. Our parents may have stayed in one place of employment for their entire careers; I stayed in the same classroom and same teaching position for 30 years before retiring. The last estimate I heard was that we will have, on average, twelve different employers in their lifetime. And it is similar with marriage; not much endurance there. When the going gets a little tough, some find that flight is preferable to fight, and the marriage ends quickly. I heard last week of a young lady who was married and divorced in less than six months. It took longer to plan the wedding than the wedding lasted.

Paul says, “Suffering produces endurance.” Athletes in particular have learned that when a person punishes their body during training, then endurance will prevail in the competition. I think of athletes who compete in marathon races. They don’t get up one day and say I think I am going to run a marathon today. No, they begin by running for exercise and increase the distance they run until they are able to compete in a 5K. They may continue to increase the distance they run until they feel ready to try running a marathon. This training doesn’t last for a couple of weeks, it takes commitment and will last for years or even their entire life. But you see, by race day, they have established a routine. Their body will simply do what it has been trained to do over these many months. And that’s what character is: it is doing the right thing naturally, because a person has done it over a long period of time.

I am amazed at people who consistently make good decisions, and are able to do so quickly. They make their decision and then move forward and they don’t look back. It’s not that they take decision-making lightly; on the contrary, they take it very seriously. But they seem to know, instinctively, what the right decision is. These are people of character. They have come through the struggles of life over a period of time, and it has produced in them a definite sense of right and wrong. Someone was once asked “How can I learn to make good decisions?” and the person answered, “Make some bad decisions.” That is to say, the pain of the past is the greatest of teachers for our future.

I have people in my own life who are like this…people of character. People who when you ask them a question, you know what their answer will be. I don’t always agree with their answer, but I always have an idea of how they will respond, even before they are asked. There is a constancy about them that I wish I had, but I’m sure they gained it through personal experiences of a lifetime; experiences of suffering and endurance. Surround yourself with people of character.

Paul says “…suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character…and character produces hope….” The word “hope” for Paul, was not like “hope” for us. For us, the word hope is used synonymously with the word “wish.” I hope I get a raise – I wish I’d get a raise. That’s how we use that word. But for Paul, the word hope meant certainty, or confidence. Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Or the great hymn of the church “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.” Paul says that character leads to confidence.

When we become people of character, we don’t have to wonder if we are doing the right thing, or thinking the right thing, or saying the right thing. When we are people of character, what we think, or say, or do will simply be extensions of who we are, children of God. I guess that’s what I long for in my life; a consistency, a confidence that who I am on the inside will be reflected by what people see on the outside. That the things I say and do will be a clear reflection of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. When that happens, then I will know that I have character.