

Suffering, Reconciliation, and Hope

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I'm guessing that for some of you who have graduating seniors, this morning might feel poignant. And last week, if you had an AOB student, that might've felt a little poignant to you. It always does to me.

There is this line in the confirmation text where the students are encouraged and asked to make the promise that they will be patient in suffering, and they promise to do that. It breaks my heart because they don't know what they're promising. It's heartbreaking. They have no idea what lies ahead.

Today we hear that Paul will boast in suffering. So patience and boasting seemed to me like an oxymoron when it comes to suffering. How can that possibly be?

If we were a really honest, transparent group of people and had conversations after worship and asked each other the question, *in what way are you suffering?* you would hear things that would just bring you to your knees. The kinds of things that break people's hearts. For example: as I age, I just recently noticed that my fingers won't fit together easily anymore; I have to prop one up. That's just one little thing.

The suffering that comes from watching a lifelong partner slowly slip into dementia—just out of your reach—more and more as each day passes.

The suffering that comes when you love someone and they stop you and say, *I don't love you anymore*.

The kind of suffering that comes in a phone call when a doctor calls to tell you that you need to come to the hospital right away, or when the doctor tells you what it truly is that's bothering you. That kind of suffering.

And I wonder how patience can address that. And certainly not boasting. You've gotten very quiet, haven't you? When I first said patience and suffering, it amused you. But there is some suffering that is so crucial, it is so far beyond humor.

That is not the suffering that confirmation students promised to have patience about. And it certainly isn't the suffering that Paul is boasting about. You and I know that suffering is part of life; it's woven into life in such a way that it makes life a rich fabric, right? That even with suffering, we recognize joy more easily, more quickly, more relieved. That's not what Paul's talking about.

Paul is talking about the kind of suffering that you and I are called to on behalf of the gospel. In John's texts, that is the truth that the spirit hopes to reveal to you in me in a very practical, real way. The truth that we're called to suffer as we follow Jesus, who says he is the way, the truth, and the life.

Now that's a suffering that I'd avoid, that at many times over my lifetime I've sidestepped. Because it comes with a cost, doesn't it? It's not something that you get better from.

It's a kind of suffering that wears you down so that you begin to recognize Jesus in the people whom you liked the least. It's a kind of suffering that raises you to a level so that you're no longer willing to stay apart. You relentlessly move towards reconciliation with your enemy, to a point where you'd love your enemy. It is a special kind of suffering in which you and I might boast because it results in this hope that doesn't disappoint.

I have had many hopes disappointed. When I was a graduating senior from high school, I was going to do off-Broadway theater. I was sorely disappointed. However, when I was ordained, my father said, *you'll make anything theater*. The heart wants what the heart wants.

You've known hopes that have been disappointed. And yet we're called to this suffering that enables us to move towards a hope that doesn't disappoint. That is the truth that the spirit longs to reveal to us, that makes us stalwart, that makes us strong.

But it's a hard way. And Jesus is our example. It was hard for him. It did bring him to his knees in Gethsemane where he wept.

So, towards the end of my senior year, they had what was called then a Sadie Hawkins Dance. So, I decided to ask Doug. I liked boys who were funny. I still like people who are funny, who can make me laugh. And he said yes, so went to the dance.

I didn't know him very well. All I knew was that he could be kind of funny. And at the very last dance, he looked at me and

he stepped back and looked at me and said, *Dancing with you is like pushing a house around all night.*

I did what you just did: I laughed. But I went home hurt and humiliated. I didn't deserve that.

I'm sure that as a young boy, he thought he had said something charming. I have no idea. But over the course of years, every once in a while, I would think that to myself: *dancing with me is like pushing a house around.* That kind of suffering for which I have no patience or would in any case boast out.

So, let's fast forward 50 years to my 50-year high school reunion. I wondered if Doug would be there. I also wondered if John would be there, a boy on whom I had an entire four-year crush.

Doug was there, and I went up to him and he looked at my name tag. I looked kind of in the ballpark of my senior high school picture on my name tag.

He said: *Susan. Hi.*

I said: *You know what you said to me? You said dancing with me was like pushing a house around all night.*

He said: *I said that? Oh my God, I can't believe I said that to you. I am so sorry. I...I...I really said that?*

I said: *Yes, you did.*

And I walked away. I got my revenge. It took a really long time, but I humiliated him back.

That is not the spirit of truth that you and I have been given. We're called to seek reconciliation. How much lovelier of me would it have been if I had said, *it's good to see you. How are you?* Instead, I sent him away disbelieving that at one moment in his life he'd been cool, and I wanted to rub his face in it. That's the kind of hope that disappoints.

So how are we to live into this kind of suffering that we could boast in, this kind of patience in suffering? The holy spirit, the Trinity tells us how that might work for us. I don't know if you heard it, but my husband pointed it out to me earlier this week: all the pronouns Paul uses are plural.

We boast in our suffering.

We endure.

In order for you and me to live into the spirit of the truth, the way, and the life of Jesus Christ, we must cling to one another, as surely as the three persons of the Trinity. They are our model.

We need each other so that we don't seek revenge. So that we don't try to humiliate one another in return for our own humiliation. So that we seek above all to be kind and merciful. We do that only in each other's company.

How I wished I had said to one of my other classmates that I was going to confront Doug, because in their face I would have seen the truth. They would have gone: *Oh, don't do that.*

This community that Jesus says is gathered in by the spirit is meant to help us live in the way that Jesus lived. To live in the way that the Trinity is shaped: intrinsically knit together so that you and I can be the expression of God's love. It doesn't work when we try to do it alone, but together? Hope that does not disappoint.

Amen.