

Sunday, February 25, 2018 – Second Sunday in Lent
“Leaving Despair Behind”

Romans 5: 1-11

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Comparison/Contrast Structure

Adapted from CSL Series “Leave It Behind”

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

No one likes suffering. Sure there are people who seem bent on their own destruction, people who want to drag down others with them – misery loves company, but who loves being miserable? In fact, I think the world hates nothing more than suffering. It is considered the worst of all evils. A wise sage of our time once put it this way: “Fear leads to anger; anger leads to hate; hate, leads to suffering.” If you haven’t heard that one you’re forgiven, it’s a quote from Yoda, the Jedi Master from the much maligned prequel, A Phantom Menace, Episode I – usually considered the worst film in the Star Wars canon.

And no doubt there’s some truth to this. I don’t think I’ve met anyone in total despair who didn’t first undergo immense suffering. The nature of that suffering may be different, but everyone in despair has suffered. And I think if we’re honest, we’ve all danced with despair at one time or another.

Each of today’s Bible readings suggests reasons for despair. Abraham and Sarah, had no children, were old and I assume had given up hope of having children and heirs. In the epistle lesson, Paul talks about suffering. Suffering is an invitation to despair. And in the Gospel Jesus told His disciples that He was going to suffer and die. Peter reacted to that with anger. Whether Peter despaired at that moment, I don’t know, but by the time the disciples get to Calvary and the tomb, the tomb with the corpse still in it, by that time they all despaired.

What has led you to despair? What might happen that could plunge you into despair? Childlessness, physical or emotional suffering, not realizing your dreams for life? We ask God for our basic needs, our “daily bread” in the Lord’s Prayer. Martin Luther says, “Daily bread includes everything that has to do with the support and needs of the body, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, home, land, animals, money, goods, a devout husband or wife, devout children, devout workers, devout and faithful rulers, good government, good weather; peace, health, self-control, good reputation, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.”

You know that those are all gifts of God to us in this life. You know what else? It's all going to be taken away from you, sooner or later. It may happen bit by bit or it may happen in one fell swoop, but it will happen and you will suffer for it. You will lose the stuff of "daily bread." Losing these things could lead you to despair.

But it doesn't have to – in a world where suffering is the worst of all evils, despair is sure to follow. But what if suffering doesn't have to lead to despair? God is calling us home and He says, "It's ok to leave all that stuff in the place of your earthly sojourn. It hurts to lose it but I'm calling you to something better. I'm calling you to Myself." Our challenge, therefore, is to give up despair, give up the possibility of despair and replace it with the living hope of the resurrection. Martin Luther put it this way in his famous hymn; we sang it last Sunday. "And take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife, though these all be gone, our vict'ry has been won; The Kingdom ours remaineth" (LSB 656, 4). So let's get into our minds lightening the load as we journey to our true home. Let's leave despair behind.

In the Bible, the opposite of despair is hope. Paul has his own Yoda-like list, and it carries the counsel and wisdom of God. We rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." This hope to replace despair is based upon the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Did you catch it in the Gospel? "He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mark 8:31). Did you get that? Peter didn't, he missed the hope. Without hope, there's a void in your life. For Peter that void was filled with anger, with rebuke, and by the time of Jesus' death, despair.

Leaving despair behind means clinging to the words of Jesus as He leads us into the future. Leaving despair behind means holding onto hope despite our feelings. This is what enables even grieving people to grieve, but not as those who have no hope.

C.F.W. Walther, the first president of both the seminary I attended and our denomination, said this to men training to be pastors. "In your sermons you like to treat subjects like these: "The blessed state of a Christian," and the like. Well, do not forget that the

blessedness of Christians does not consist in pleasant feelings, but in their assurance that in spite of the bitterest feelings imaginable they are accepted with God and in their dying hour will be received into heaven. That is indeed great blessedness.

It is, indeed, proper that in your sermons you depict the happy moments which occasionally come to Christians when they are given a foretaste of their future bliss; but you must tell your hearers at the same time that these are merely passing moments in the lives of Christians, sun-rays which once in a while find their way into their hearts. If the description of such moments of bliss is given in a proper manner, it produces neither anguish and grief nor doubt regarding one's being in the faith, but a heartfelt longing for an experience such as the preacher is describing. Especially such Christians who have fought their fight faithfully will feel that way. They lay prostrate in their spiritual distress and imagined that they were rejected by God, and, behold, then their heavenly Father was pleased to pour such celestial joy into their hearts that in their ecstasy they believed they were no longer on earth, but in heaven. (Law and Gospel, Dau, 312)

That's why we're not sugarcoating it here friends – life is tough, real tough. I could try to puff you up with a bunch of feel-goodism and inspire you, I could stick to happy, positive things, but then what would I be doing – I'd be leaving you behind in your suffering, in the places where you might otherwise despair. Sweeping the suffering under the rug only makes it fester. Instead, let's take it head on. Let's be honest about it. Yoda was right – fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to suffering... but suffering is not the worst of all evils. Suffering doesn't always lead to despair... but leaving despair behind isn't easy, it doesn't happen with a snap of the fingers. It's a hard, lifelong struggle. It's so hard, in fact, that, you and I can't honestly do it unless we hang onto the hope of our resurrected Jesus. Time after time, temptations to despair will still come, but the Spirit of God raises us heavenward with hope.

I was able to be a witness to such a hope moment last week. Many of you know Luzonica (Luz) DeGuzman, Ed DeGuzman's wife. On New Year's Eve she had a massive heart attack and heart bypass surgery. A couple days later she developed pneumonia and has been in the intensive care unit ever since. She had to have a trach tube put in, a hole through her throat. For weeks she was fully aware of what was happening and unable to speak. You could

understand how suffering would lead to despair but when she was finally able to speak again it was praises of God that came from her lips – praise for helping her, allowing her to be a witness of His love to the hospital workers. “He is so good to me,” she said. She was overflowing, busting with weeks worth of words and continued this way for a good fifteen minutes. I had goosebumps in her presence. I seriously doubted whether I would be so grateful if I were in her shoes. I share this example not to produce anguish, grief or doubt regarding your being in the faith, but a heartfelt longing to experience such trust of what really can be, from a real person from right here among this congregation to have this celestial joy of God poured into her heart precisely through her suffering. Martin Schalling put it this way in his hymn, “Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart.”

And should my heart for sorrow break . . . Let me say, my heart has broken and yours has too. Our hearts are sure to break again, as much as you and I don't want that. And should my heart for sorrow break, my trust in Thee can nothing shake. Hold on to hope!
Thou art the portion I have sought; Thy precious blood my soul has bought.
Lord Jesus Christ, my God and Lord, my God and Lord, forsake me not! I trust Thy Word! In Jesus' name, Amen.