

Hope in the Spirit
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Romans 5:1-5

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.

What a great passage from scripture we have to reflect on this morning. This is one of those passages to put in the back pocket of your life and pull out when necessary. Somehow, in this passage which is just five verses long, we've got it all. All of the Christian faith wrapped up in just a few sentences! We've got Faith. Hope. And Love. Paul likes this combination and it's in his first letter to the Corinthians that we hear the verse many of us know: "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love".¹ The terms Peace and Grace are also mentioned: a couple more of my favorites. And in these few verses, we get a succinct theology of the Trinity: the interrelation of God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. On top of that, this is one of only a couple instances in Paul's letters where he explicitly states the phrase upon which so much of the Reformation was based: Justification by Faith. For those of you who haven't encountered this phrase before, the short version of its meaning is that our salvation is dependant solely on God's grace and our faith in Jesus Christ and has nothing to do with "works" or any ability through our own actions to save ourselves.

¹ 1 Cor. 13:13, NRSV

So there is a LOT going on in this passage of scripture. It's one of those scriptural nuggets that seems deceptively simple. This morning I'm going to focus on the very last bit of this selection:

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.

So let's reflect for a bit on the Holy Spirit and Hope—and the connection between the two.

Last Sunday we celebrated Pentecost. The big Holy Spirit day on our Christian calendar. It's the Sunday we reflect on the revelation of the Holy Spirit to the disciples--the tongues of Fire and speaking in different languages. We had a neat service here at Plymouth last week with several folks simultaneously reading the scripture in foreign languages. Besides celebrating Pentecost, last weekend also happened to be Memorial Day weekend, so I'm betting that some of you weren't here to reflect on that story, that dramatic display of the Holy Spirit. So let's talk Holy Spirit.

What did Paul mean by his use of the term Holy Spirit? That's a question that one could spend a lifetime trying to answer. And I imagine there are probably several scholars out there right now trying to do just that. But I think we can safely say that for Paul, who is evangelizing and spreading the word of Christ's life and death, the Holy Spirit was that aspect of God that was *still present*. Jesus had died and was gone. So Paul's motivation to spread the gospel, his inspiration, was the Spirit of God.

What do we think of the Holy Spirit? Last week Hal had us think about and name some of our understandings of Spirit. And I'd like to ask you to bring those images and thoughts to your mind once again. Maybe you didn't grow up in church and the whole idea of the Holy Spirit just seems odd, or like some ambiguous and obscure theological construct. Maybe you

only connect with the idea of Spirit and not of a more traditional God figure. I was talking with a youth recently who said that she doesn't really believe in God the way other people do, (or the way she thinks other people do), but that she does see beauty in life and she looks for that beauty. She can feel a Divine presence in nature and with friends. And I thought, "exactly!"—that's a very Spirit centered understanding and experience of God. As you think more about your own understandings of the Spirit I'd like to talk a bit about Pentecostalism. Last week Hal mentioned the shifts in worldwide Christianity and had us think about our own church and the ways in which we can be bridge builders. Let's look again at global Christianity.

"During the twentieth century, the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement became the largest single category in Protestantism. 'It's growth from zero to 400 million in ninety years is unprecedented in the whole of church history.' If, currently, Roman Catholics are the largest Christian group, then classical Pentecostals are now the second largest, and gaining fast. Catholics now make up 50 percent of the worldwide Christian church, while Pentecostals make up 20 percent."² This worldwide movement sees approximately 54,000 new adherents a day.

What's going on? A few more statistical considerations will fill out this picture. Pentecostals, on a global scale, are more urban than rural; there are more women Pentecostals than men; there is a higher percentage of Pentecostals in the Third World than the Western world; the great majority of Pentecostals are poor and not wealthy; and on average they are younger than 18. So the dominant categories of Pentecostals are: urban, women, Third World, poor and young.³

It's not easy to give a simple definition of Pentecostal belief and practice because this is a multicultural and multinational movement. But just a couple of observations. Pentecostalism

² Karkkainen, Veli-Matti, *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Perspective*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 89.

³ *Ibid.*, 89.

gets its name from? Pentecost—of course. Pentecostals believe that the Holy Spirit can touch the modern day individual and imbue us with spiritual gifts. These gifts may include the gift of healing, prophecy or, more typically, speaking in tongues. Those who experience such gifts might say they are experiencing God through the mediation of the Holy Spirit. And if the Holy Spirit is seen as a manifestation or aspect of God in a Trinitarian sense, then these experiences are interpreted as direct experiences of God.

What does all this have to do with Romans chapter five? More importantly, what does it have to do with us? We're not Pentecostals.

Well, how does a young, poor, Third World woman experience Hope in her situation? A Hope that does not disappoint her? Is God's love poured into her heart through the Holy Spirit that has been given to her? Yes. Over and over the answer to that question is yes. Maybe she speaks in tongues, thereby feeling the immediate presence of the Spirit and a special-ness in her ability to connect to the Holy in this way. When one does not have access to power or authority...when one does not have influence with the powers that be in their familial, social, political and economic lives...where does one seek Hope? Where does one seek power? How does one live an empowered and worthwhile life? Pentecostalism has an answer. Pentecostalism says you can just go straight to the top. Go directly to God.

And isn't that what Paul was doing? Paul was poor and picked on and beaten and ridiculed and jailed. It's sometimes difficult to remember Paul in this way because for some of us his words have ruled our religious lives with an at times overbearing authority. But remembering his context, it seems that his direct appeal to God through Christ and the Holy Spirit was his basis of authority.

As we think of that Third World Pentecostal woman, I am reminded of a theme that seemed to keep popping up in one of my classes this past year: the equalizing potential of the Spirit. If God can manifest to individuals via the Holy Spirit then any individual can have direct access to God. Let me replay that. If God can manifest to individuals via the Holy Spirit then any individual can have direct access to God. If this is true, then no power or principality, no politician or pope, no demagogue, no global corporation or world trade organization can have authority over us! Isn't this the definition of Hope for an oppressed person? Isn't this a good way and one of the only ways of touching Hope in the face of such extreme systemic abuse? The fact that there are 400 million Pentecostals in our world today speaks to this need and this way of reaching toward Hope in the face of oppression.

So I wonder, is it easier for the oppressed Third World woman to make this connection to the Holy Spirit than it is for us? I think it may be. Because she MUST do so if she is to have any sense of empowerment and Hope in her life. But it's time now to turn the tables over.

We, you and me, stand in need of Hope no less than that "oppressed" woman. We stand in the need of Hope. I'm not so sure that we carry this need around in our consciousness on a daily basis. Nevertheless, we too need Hope. And this is where the leveling and equalizing aspect of the Holy Spirit can speak to us. We need Hope. Trying to open ourselves up to this need can be difficult if we're not currently experiencing some dramatic pain in our lives. It can be difficult to open ourselves up to the idea that we need Hope because of the way we see those who REALLY need Hope.

Maybe we're not wondering where our next meal will come from. Maybe we're not downhearted because we just lost our husband and child to AIDS. Maybe we're not worried about the prospect of walking 50 miles across the US/Mexican border without injury or death.

Maybe we're not hopeless like all those people are. Maybe it's a comfort to think we're not hopeless like that--we're not oppressed like that. Maybe that's why for some of us Paul's words in Romans chapter five roll right over us. Maybe we don't need the Hope that does not disappoint. Maybe we don't need God's love poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Why? We're not suffering.

Up till now I've left out verses 3 and 4 in our discussion of the Romans passage. Let's turn to them.

we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope

I think that to some degree we have internalized this progression from suffering to hope in our personal and cultural conscience. And we must be careful when we talk about suffering in a biblical and religious context, because too many billions of people have had and continue to have their own personal sufferings justified and prolonged by an abusive use of scripture. But I am hesitant to just gloss over the whole concept of suffering—a reality that is so very present in our human existence. I think there's a key here for helping us to understand why we so often and so easily bypass our need for hope. Why we may tend to forget our need for the Holy Spirit, for a daily connection to the presence of God. We may not perceive ourselves as ones who suffer. We may even be uncomfortable with the term. We're privileged--most of us are middle class. We're educated and well fed. The mountains and plains greet us each day. All these things are true. And I'm not pointing out these things to give us the standard middle-class guilt trip. In fact--just the opposite. We're not meant to feel bad or guilty for the things we have, for all the many blessings. We're not meant to feel bad because *we have* and the person on the street corner or the Third World Pentecostal woman *has not*. We're not meant to feel guilty, because

that very guilt may sidetrack us from recognizing we are no less in need--in need--than the “have-nots” in our world. A few weeks ago I came across a quote written on a chalkboard in one of my classrooms. This quote bears consideration: Guilt is the glue that holds prejudice in place. Guilt is the glue that holds prejudice in place. I’m still grappling with just what that means—what it means in my life.

I know that many of us do recognize our need for Hope. Our need for justice not only on a global scale, but also for justice and peace in our own hearts. Most of us get the connection. We get that what’s going on with us personally and in our own hearts is reflected in our external reality. And in writing this sermon I have, of course, been thinking a lot of our youth and their leaders who have just been commissioned to go off and face suffering and injustice and then try to make some sense out of it all. The Holy Spirit is an avenue, a way, for us to claim Hope not only for the person suffering out there, but also for the person suffering in here.

Let’s go back to today’s passage in Romans and ask ourselves: do we have Peace with God through Christ? Do we boast in our hope of sharing the Glory of God? Do we feel God’s love poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit? Do we feel that? Each day? I, for one, have to admit that I don’t always feel it. I drive a new car to a graduate school that will grant me a degree that places me in the top whatever percent of educated people in the world. I eat more than my share and can boast the love of family and community. Yet, yet, I stand in the need of Hope. I don’t often feel like boasting in my hope of sharing in the glory of God. I don’t always feel the Peace of God. And this suffering, our suffering, is all too easily hidden.

When we scan the papers and let the reality of this world’s injustices hit us, we can be overwhelmed by the magnitude of it all. We can be overwhelmed by the reflection of our place in the scheme of things. So in order to keep our sanity, our perspective, our safety, we may

block out large chunks of this reality. And we must do so. It's often necessary and easier and safer to cast this suffering from our thoughts and daily lives. Our dependence on the Spirit's inspiration and life-giving breath can fly from our minds, because at times we convince ourselves we don't need it. We think that Hope is for the hopeless. And it is. And it is when we open our hearts in the realization that we need Hope because *we* are broken and suffering people, that we are undeniably interconnected with all that is—it is in that moment that God's love can pour into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. May we drink of that Love and invite the Spirit of God to enter through our wounds and inspire our actions today and always. Amen.