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**“Grace for the Journey”
A sermon by Mindy Douglas**

**Second Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)
June 18, 2017
Exodus 19:2-8a; Matthew 9:35-38; Romans 5:1-8**

Wow, friends. It has been another hard week. Here we are, together again, following a week full of suffering for so many around the world – a ballpark shooting in Alexandria, Virginia that left Majority Whip Steve Scalise in critical condition; shootings at a UPS in San Francisco that left four dead; a fire in a public housing building in London that killed at least 30, and probably twice that many; and wars and violence that continue in nations all around the world. If you are like me, perhaps you have stopped watching or listening to the news altogether, because we have a threshold for this kind of stuff, you know. I don’t mean to practice denial or avoidance, but I do mean to limit the amount of suffering I hear shared over the airwaves. We can only take so much.

Suffering is all around us, in our world and in our own lives. I can’t think of very many who would say that suffering was a good thing and I can think of no rationally-thinking person who would wish it on themselves or those they love.

And yet, in our passage for today, we have the Apostle Paul telling the early Christians in Rome that suffering is something that is a part of the Christian life, and that it produces endurance and then character and ultimately hope.

A close friend of mine lost her 27-year-old daughter Kaitlin to mesothelioma a few years ago – cancer of the heart and lungs. Kaitlin was a vibrant, energetic, and amazing young woman – a nurse who cared for others – until her body weakened and her energy left her. She died at home surrounded by those she loved – far too soon. Her parents and younger brother plunged into the deepest of griefs. Their suffering over Kaitlin’s death was intense and took them into darkness they never knew existed and weren’t sure they could endure.

A couple of years later, when my friend had shed a layer or two of grief, we reflected on her loss. She said thoughtfully, “I would never ever wish this on anyone, and if I could go back, I would. I would do anything to have Kaitlin alive again. But I know that can’t happen. What I also know is that because of all of this we endured together, I am a better person. I am wiser. I am more compassionate about the suffering of others. I think more deeply about life and death. The colors I see are more vibrant. I rejoice in the ability to laugh and cry with those I love. I cherish my family and friends in ways I would not have known how to before. I would not have chosen this suffering and this loss, but I am a better person because of it.”

The New York Times has a weekly opinion page column on disability. The articles are written by individuals who reflect on what it is like to live in the world with what the world considers a disability. The writer of this week’s column suffered a spinal cord injury a few years ago and walks with assistance from a cane and a leg brace. At one point in the article, he reflects on the ways he changed as a result of the accident that caused his injury. He writes:

Whenever people ask me whether I would relive the day of the accident to change the outcome . . . I suddenly become uncomfortable

because I know what they expect to hear: a resounding yes. In a country that mythologizes rugged individualism, in a world where fewer Americans vote in presidential elections than watch the Super Bowl — that idealization of brawn — it would seem absurd to argue that you would not do everything you could to reverse your disability.

Indeed, a part of me wishes I could relive that day.

Still, another part of me is thankful for the opportunity to journal and read and think about my new identity over the following semester I took off from college. It was then that I wrote a novel inspired by my experience, and it was then that I began reading 17th-century poets like Robert Herrick, whose exhortation to “make much of time” motivated me to view my hiatus as a revelatory experience highlighting humanity’s fundamental dependence and neediness. I soon began to grasp a fuller sense of the extent to which literature can become an empowering means of coming to terms with our often trying lives. Impassioned, I wanted to share this realization with others; I wanted to continue writing about my experience. And so, I realized that I wanted to become a professor — rather than a lawyer, as I had anticipated since eighth grade.

In both stories, and I imagine in some of our own that we could tell, suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope – in the case of these stories, hope for a better, deeper, more authentic future. This is not true in every case of suffering, though, and I wouldn’t want to argue that it was. Nor do I think that Paul is arguing that every kind of suffering leads to hope. Paul is also in no way saying that God causes suffering. I would argue, however, that in the case of Paul’s letter to the Romans, the

suffering that comes to us all as a part of life is ultimately directed to hope through the promises of the grace of God in Christ Jesus. In this passage Paul describes the deepest and most life-giving kind of hope there is.

Paul uses all my favorite words in these verses – peace, love, hope, and grace. He starts by reminding the Romans that they have been justified (made right with God) by faith and in such they have peace with God through Jesus Christ. It is Christ who has given them access to “the grace in which we stand,” that is, the restored and right relationship with God. I love the idea that our feet are standing in grace – that grace is our solid foundation and our secure footing. But the preposition used in the Greek is translated “in” and not “on” as if we are standing at the edge of the ocean as the waves of grace gently lap at our ankles and feet.

This grace in which we stand is what ultimately gives us hope – the knowledge that while we were still weak, Christ died for us, all of us, even though we were/are ungodly, even though we didn’t/don’t deserve God’s love. Christ didn’t die for us because we were the best followers ever. Christ didn’t die for us because we had shown our love to be unswerving. No. Christ died for us even when we denied him. Christ died for us even when we betrayed him. Christ died for us even when we abandoned him. Christ died for us while we were still sinners, before we could prove ourselves, because, God knows, we never would. God came to us in Christ before we could come to God - out of grace, as a gift. While we were yet sinners, God came to us in Christ as a gift of grace – the grace in which we stand. “The scandal of the gospel,” wrote James Van Tholen as he

was dying of cancer, “is that there is nothing you can do to be made right with God; but God has made [God]self right with you.”¹

This is why we baptize infants, you know – because we believe that God comes to us before we go to God. As we baptize Barbara today, we know that she is a gift to her family and to us all and we know that God’s gift of grace in Jesus Christ – forgiveness, reconciliation and peace with God – are for her, even before she can speak, before she can walk, before she can think about such concepts of grace and hope and peace, before she can begin to grasp what God has done for her.

It isn’t easy for any of us, no matter our age, ability, intellect, or depth of faith to comprehend fully the grace of God. In fact, I would argue, it is impossible. But there are times, sometimes in the midst of suffering, sometimes when we face the really big questions of life and death, when we begin to get a glimpse of what this scandalous grace might look like and how we might know that it laps at our feet as we walk this journey of life.

Van Tholen, in his first sermon after a seven-month absence during which he received treatments for cancer, preached on this passage. After years of preaching on grace, he had this to say:

This is a silly thing to admit. I don’t know if I ever realized the absolutely shocking, radical idea that is God’s grace. I said those things about it fully believing them, but at the same time fully believing – or at least expecting – that I had a few decades yet before I really needed to count on them. . . . So, for the first time in my life, I had not only to preach this scandalous good news, not only to believe it, but to rest on it, to

¹ From the book “*Where All Hope Lies*,” by James Van Tholen.

depend on it, to stake my life on it. And as I faced all of this and was frightened by it, I remembered one of the simplest, most powerful statements in the entire Bible. “For while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” [In this] there is hope, an unshakable hope.²

This, friends, is the deeper hope that this passage is talking about. It is the hope comes to us through grace. This is the hope that allows us to trust that the suffering of the day – in our world and in our own lives - is not the end result, but that life and peace await us by grace at the end of every day, at the end of our lives, and ultimately at the time when God’s Kingdom of peace and justice reigns here on earth. This is the gospel message that Joe Harvard preached here with you for 33 years and the gospel message that was preached in this place by many others long before he arrived and the gospel message that will be preached for decades and centuries yet to come. It is the message of the grace in which we stand when we baptize infants and welcome stranger and the grace that guides our journey. It is the message of the God who loves the unlovable, redeems the irredeemable, and went to the cross even for you, even for me.

Because of this, we dare to hope. We dare to love. We dare to follow Jesus. In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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² From the book “*Where All Hope Lies*,” by James Van Tholen.