**Romans 5:1-8 March 15, 2020**

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

Our text for this morning comes from our Epistle lesson, Romans chapter 5 here re-reading these words. “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It is my job as your pastor to take the Word of God that is provided each week in the lessons as set out in the 3-year lectionary, and in the specific season of the Church Year we are in, and apply them to your life. Which means that for this particular week I can’t just ignore what has affected all of our lives. Whether you are reading these words after downloading them off the website and reading them from home in a self-imposed quarantine or hearing them this morning as we are gathered here in God’s house together, we can’t ignore that the world has been put on pause. You can read about our response to it in the announcement section of the bulletin, and we will reassess each week if more drastic measures need to be taken for your safety, but that’s where we are now. Some churches have canceled activities, some have canceled celebration of the Lord’s Supper, some have even canceled all services entirely. School is canceled, sports are canceled, large events and meetings are canceled, the world is on pause until we figure things out. Why? Safety and concern for the threat of this virus spreading and the danger it can pose to all of us, but especially the most vulnerable. Because this has brought suffering. Suffering physical pains from this disease, suffering in the form of panic and hysteria, suffering in anxiety and worry over financial implications of a world that is put on pause. And here Paul reminds us as Christians, that we are called to “Rejoice in our sufferings.”

Lent’s mission, is to focus us on the cross, in a sense Lent can be seen as a pause on your daily life to recognize the seriousness of sin and how it needs to be paid for. Lent isn’t a season that comes by accident or without proper preparation, we can see it on the horizon, it doesn’t just take over our daily lives like a pandemic does, but that doesn’t mean the threat is any less serious. If Lent is focused on the cross than Lent is focused on our Savior and how our Savior saves us from sin. How our Savior suffered, and went through pain on our behalf. And when we sing these heart wrenching lent hymns, as we have on Wednesday nights, and on Sunday mornings, does it sound like rejoicing? “Alas and did my Savior Bleed! And did my Sovereign die, would he devote that sacred head for such a worm as I?” Soon we will sing, “Lamb of God, Pure and Holy, who on the cross didst suffer.” It doesn’t sound like rejoicing, so what does Paul mean? How can we rejoice in the midst of suffering? Specific events that bring us joy, like the March Madness tournament, like concerts and celebrations, as well as other forms of entertainment are canceled, we are told not to meet together or be together, we are told to go off by ourselves and sit in isolation until the storm has passed. O Lord, how can we possibly rejoice?

Because, as Paul himself puts it in the verse prior, we rejoice in the “hope” of the glory of God. Hope. It can be a dangerous word in desperate circumstances. Hope. It can be shut out and smothered by despair, anxiety, hysteria, panic, a fear and mindset that shows itself in telling everyone, “there is no hope for all of us to make it, there is no hope for life to ever return to normal, there is no hope in government, in hospitals, in doctors, in tests, in anything, hope is dead, all we can hope to do is hide and pray it doesn’t find us in our own isolation.” That is not our calling, that is not how we as Christians respond to suffering, or pain, or pestilence, meaning disease and sickness, it’s not how we deal with loss. We have hope, the hope of the glory of God. The hope of salvation found in the surefire words of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, how quickly do we forget this wonderful truth, how quickly do the words of John 3:16, that we meditated upon and heard JUST LAST WEEK escape our minds when it comes to our lives here on Earth. A week ago, may feel like a year ago, after all that has happened, and yet the words stand true. “For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” There is your hope. You shall not perish, for faith is found in your heart through the work of the Holy Spirit, and you have no reason to despair because nothing can separate you from the love of God who sent His Son to die in your place and save you from sin.

My dear friends, suffering in this life is the moment where we show the true faith in our hearts. It’s easy to rejoice in good times, when everything goes your way, to be a fair-weather Christian like a fair-weather fan of a sports team that is always winning. Rejoicing in suffering means that you’re realistic about where you live, and I don’t mean in Michigan, I mean in this fallen creation. Sickness has always existed, look at Jesus’ ministry where he’s constantly met with the sick and the dying wherever he goes. Suffering is part of life, but it doesn’t have to define you. Rejoicing in suffering means that you see the positive that can come from it, “in that it produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces 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.”

God has not abandoned us, God is not far from you in the midst of your suffering and the changes that are being made for the safety of our world. I’ve noticed two different reactions to this whole debacle, and I would advise you not to fall off into either ditch in your daily life. On the one hand I’ve witnessed those who have heard the warnings and scoffed at them as nothing. Who have seen the numbers of infected and disregarded them. They don’t see any danger in what’s going on, and have almost gone about their lives in defiance of any kind of practical advice that would help keep them healthy or help those around them stay safe as well. On the other hand I’ve seen those who have received word of what’s going on with great fear, jumping to the worst conclusions at all times, and taking the threat of infection to mean certain death. No matter where you fall on the spectrum, repent. This is no time for bravado, this is no time for hysteria. You came here for a reason, and so come to God’s altar not in defiance, but in repentance. God didn’t come to die for the perfect and righteous, he came to die for the ungodly and fallen. “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly…..God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

In the end that’s all that matters, you are a redeemed child of God, you are saved by His death and washed clean in his blood. What can the world do to you beyond that? Will sickness separate you from this salvation? Never. Can fear drive you away from God’s Word, if it means that you have to meditate upon it in isolation? Certainly not. Even if you know that your time is short, does that mean you have to give in to despair and the fear of being separated from God’s presence? Because you weren’t good enough? Because you didn’t do enough? Because you didn’t make yourself righteous? Hear again the words. “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Don’t fear, don’t despair, don’t panic, rejoice in the life you have, won for you on the cross. Rejoice and be glad, your salvation is secure.

As your pastor I am called to bring these words that you hear from God’s Word and apply them to your life. They speak of suffering. I don’t know the extent of it, because I don’t know the future. The implications of what will happen here at Trinity if there are multiple cases of this virus in our county, and in our town, and how fast it’s spreading may mean that for a time we have to cease to meet together. For now we are ceasing touching each other. But this is not the end of our time together in the grand scheme of things, because suffering only produces endurance, and in that endurance is the evidence of the faith in our hearts that will not be ashamed of the Gospel of our Lord and will not despise preaching and His Word even if we have to receive it from the comfort of our own homes. God be with you, and stay safe. Guard your souls and the hope of the glory of God as carefully as you guard your bodies. Don’t let the smallest bit of resistance hinder your journey to the cross, because waiting at the end is a day of rejoicing over the resurrected Son of God.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.