

Romans 5:1-11

This morning I would like to talk to you about a place. It is a place that most, if not all of us have been. And if we haven't been there, we've been pretty darn close.

I can also assure you that at some point in your life if you haven't been there -- you will find yourself in this place. Unfortunately, this place is a place that we will return to this again and again.

Right now if you are thinking Disney world... well, you're unfortunately not even close.

This it is **not** a place, where we willingly go. Of course, then again Disney World is not a place where many of us would willingly go.

Unfortunately this place is a place that both you and I wish didn't exist. But it does. I would imagine that each one would probably describe our experiences of this place quite differently.

Parker Palmer, author and teacher, describes his experience in this place as "the snake pit of the soul, the dark woods." It is a place where Palmer describes he felt "nothing but the burden of life... and the apparent futility of trying to sustain it."

For Palmer was driven to this place by the demons of clinical depression. Like Palmer, each one of us is haunted by our own demons. Yes, some of us we will encounter the demons of depression or mental illness, but for others of us we will call the demons by different names- cancer, addiction, abuse, grief, loneliness, chronic pain, terminal illness.

Whatever demons we face, they often drive us to this place, a place that feels like a giant black hole, a pit of despair that swallows us up and where darkness is so dark it permeates every recess of our souls.

And yet Paul and some of the other writers of the New Testament believe that this place of suffering and deep despair is to have a spiritual purpose in our lives as Christian people.

Did anyone **this morning**, catch what Paul said about suffering in his letter to the Romans? He said "... and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, **we boast in our sufferings.**" And this is not the type boasting, the one that we would associate more with bragging.

The "I'm so great because ..." kind of boasting. But, boasting that means to rejoice, or **to exult**. I'm not sure that the English word "boast" accurately describes what Paul really intend in this passage.

Perhaps, the Revised Standard Version of the bible, more accurately describes Paul's intention when it says, "We rejoice in our sufferings."

Frank Runyeon reminded some of us on Wednesday evening that this is also something that the James touches on in his letter. James writes in the opening words of his letter, "My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, **consider it nothing but a joy** because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance."

Perhaps the difficulty with what Paul says and what James says seems to be the glaringly obvious disconnect between joy or rejoicing and our experience of that place of suffering.

I'm not quite sure, but I am having a hard time thinking about how one finds joy or is able to rejoice as ones faces say the prospect of chemotherapy. Joy and/ or rejoicing seem to be so foreign to these kinds of situations.

And yet, how many of us have heard someone say that cancer was the best thing that ever happened to them?

I have to admit sometimes I am a bit skeptical when I hear someone say such things. Of course, that is until I really think about it. Because after thinking about it that same person in their next breath would probably also admit **that cancer was also one of the worst things that ever happened to them.**

As well, how many of us have heard and some of us have even experienced first hand how a tragic situation has helped us to redefine our priorities. Those types of situations often help us to say “I’m sorry” or “I love you,” “I am proud of you,” or “please forgive me.”

When all else fails and life is crumbling down around us--- are these not the things that matter most to us and to our families?

However, I’m not sure that those areas scratch the surface of what Paul or what James are trying to convey when they say in their letters “to rejoice in our sufferings or consider your trials nothing but a joy.

Try to remember the context in which Paul is making this statement. Paul has carefully constructed his theological argument one that says by faith in what Christ has done through his death on the cross we are justified or made right with God. The cross is a once and for all time action.

Nothing can change what occurred there, nothing can make this action null and void. Paul claims that this action brings peace to our relationship with God, not a subjective peace (not our feeling at peace with God) but rather an objective statement of truth that God through Christ has made peace with humanity.

Therefore, Paul believes that because we are now-- forever in right relationship with God our suffering and our trials can be seen in a new light.

No longer does one have to look at the tragedy that befalls us and think of it as God trying to get our attention. Or even worse, we no longer have to think that our suffering is a punishment from God for some sin or impropriety. We can rest in the assurance that Christ has taken care of our sins, our improprieties and that our relationship with God has been reconciled.

Instead, Paul sees the tragedies that befall us as a way in which we are invited to know God more fully. And that is why we are able to rejoice in suffering. Not find joy in our suffering or be happy in our suffering, but to rejoice that in suffering we have an incredible opportunity to know and experience God's grace more fully.

You might ask then ask, "How do know we know God more fully in our suffering?" --I'm not sure. I guess would have to agree with Parker Palmer when he says "Mystery surrounds every deep experience of the human heart: the deeper we go into the heart's darkness or its light, the closer we get to the ultimate mystery of God."

Might we in our times of suffering commend them to God!

And in that action might, we search the darkness of suffering and tragedy for the still small voice of God knowing that somewhere that voice is calling out to us saying that I am here with you, in this dark place and that I will never leave you nor will I forsake you.

AMEN