

Chris Burton
June 7, 2023
A Sermon for Every Sunday (Richmond, VA)
"Hope Does Not Disappoint"
Romans 5:1-5

Good morning. It is good to be with you all this morning. This morning I want to talk about a question that I wrestle with. It has been on my heart for some time and I suspect you have thought about it from time to time as well. It is a question borne out of difficult times which, in my estimation, means it is a hopeful question. Hope is a gift given specifically for difficult times. Times like these. My question is how might we create a space where a common appreciation of everyone's dignity thrives? I pray that isn't a cumbersome question but let me repeat it once more: how might we, you and I, create a space where a common appreciation of everyone's dignity thrives? A space where people realize and can bear witness to the truth included in our scripture today. Hope does not disappoint.

This question is borne out of a perceived necessity. Everybody needs to be nurtured. Reminded that they are fearfully and wonderfully made. We can even boil it down simply to encouragement. What are the spaces in our lives where that sort of encouragement happens? We are so connected now through technology and social media yet people still feel so alone. Someone can watch thirty sermons today if they so choose but people still need to be pastored. People still need community. Someone to send them a text message, give them a phone call, or visit. Remind them that they have not been forgotten. I think

about this in the context of Paul's ministry and the churches he wrote letters to but particularly this church in today's scripture; a church in the seat of Empire. There's a certain loneliness that fills the air when you are countercultural. A certain seduction toward despair because what you are doing is not popular. In the case of the church of Rome, it was dangerous. Certainly costly. In an empire culture, with its trappings of hierarchy and hegemony, this small group proclaiming that Jesus is Lord meant Caesar was not. Saying Jesus is Lord in that context was both unpatriotic and blasphemous. They lived their faith under the shadow of death daily. Yet still, here we have Paul communicating an understanding of that peril as an instrument of God's glory.

If God is not in it then truly the labour is in vain. Community without Christ as the tie that binds has its limitations. Certainly, people have a love for one another, can be decent toward another but Paul positions Christ as the source of what we need to get through. We see in verse 1, Paul speaks about this peace with God that is granted to us through Christ. This "peace with God" through Christ is contrasted with being enemies with God as Paul mentions in verse 10 of this chapter. Paul notes, "For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life." Community in Christ is founded on the ultimate demonstration of love. A demonstration that prioritizes sacrifice over self-preservation. One that offers a free gift where the giver absorbs all of the cost. That is the foundation of our faith, friends. Not mere transactions. Certainly not

self-gratification or exploitation but a demonstration of love certified by gratitude justified by faith. I love the theological weight of the word justified. When we have been justified by God, God is our reason. Why be loving? Why be a peacemaker? Why leave places better than you found it? Because while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. This news is too good, just too good, to keep to ourselves.

Imagine with me, church, if we lived the great commission in this way? Loving folks how Christ loves us. Not waiting for them to get right, or somehow needing to earn our kindness but letting love be our signature. Our fragrance in the world. This has to be a better way of making disciples than tryna dominate folks. This has to be a better way of making disciples than leaving folks out. Especially in this time! Imagine how transformative it would be for us to love people so much that it becomes louder than their doubt? Louder than the noise of the world that tells them they are insignificant. Louder than the noise that says they are forgotten. Louder than the noise that says they are not worthy of dignity.

When we speak of dignity this morning, I want us to think about how love adds value. We spoke about how Christ met us with love while we were still enemies with God. I want us to think about that in terms of the ultimate granting of access. Christ met us in our worst position and gave us the very best. What does that look like in our time and space? Interrupting indignity by taking Christ's words seriously. In Luke 4, Jesus reads the book of Isaiah aloud and tells those gathered, "these words are fulfilled today." Jesus takes on the words of Isaiah as

the foundations of his public ministry. Preaching to the poor, healing the brokenhearted, proclaiming liberty to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, granting liberty to those who are oppressed and proclaiming the acceptable year of the Lord. All of these activities add value to the recipient's life. All of these activities interrupt the Empire's message that only some people have worth. Or worth is based on what one is able to produce. Christ flips this on its head and demonstrates that love, God's love, adds value and makes life worth living.

Jesus says in the gospel of John that "I come that they (us!) might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." Far too many people do not live, they merely exist. We hear it in our culture all the time; people are living for the weekend. Measuring their lives by events they anticipate instead of the gift of every breath. Far too many people do not have what they need. Clean water, proper nutrition, housing, education and employment. Makes me wanna holler, "this ain't living!" Sometimes I see the inequities in our world and I catch a glimpse of the Lord's prayer in its fullness. When things are on Earth as it is in Heaven, life and life more abundantly won't be mere abstraction. I do not believe Jesus was speaking figuratively. The abundant life stirring in our souls will spill into the ways in which we treat each other; it will shift culture and transform the world. Friends, we must disabuse ourselves of any pretense of scarcity. Paul tells the Galatians that "freedom is for the purpose of serving my neighbor," (Gal 5:13). This peace with God that we enjoy is worth sharing. People cannot hear it over the grumbling of their children's bellies, the cries for justice, or, much worse,

our moral failings and inconsistencies. It is perplexing and undoubtedly off putting to preach about liberty while we contribute to our neighbors' bondage.

Suffering is a part of our experiences on this side of eternity. We have enough of it that we do not need to contribute to anyone's suffering. It's initially confounding when we see Paul tell the church in Rome that "we also glory in tribulations." Why would we glory in such difficult times? Shouldn't we sound more like the psalmist who cries, "Don't keep silent, O God of my praise," (Psalm 109:1)? How can something as awful as tribulation be so vital for our spiritual formation?

I think of my times in the hospital. Living with Lupus has led me to be hospitalized for significant portions of my life. I remember in the fall and winter of 2017, waking up every day hoping for news that I would be out of the hospital soon. Yet bad would become worse and my belief that I would ever get out was tested. I do not wish that journey on anyone else but I am so grateful that God allowed me to go through such tribulation. I believe that the problems in our life are invitations to build our empathy. Perhaps if we never went through ill circumstances, we would delude ourselves into thinking we were better than other people. Maybe when we encountered people who suffered, the best we could offer is sympathy. Some sort of "I'm sorry but I can't relate." But when we go through, we are able to not just say "I'm sorry" but to say "I understand."

Paul places tribulation as the very first step on the road to hope. Verse 3 tells us that tribulation produces perseverance. Perseverance is essential for our

walk with God. If I could sum up the walk with God in two words it would be, “Hold on!” The race is not given to the swift but to those who endure to the end. Hold on!

Those of us who have had the privilege of working with young people know what it is like to tell a child to hold on. To not quit. To remember that we were made to do difficult things. When we persevere and endure, we become a dependable person. A lighthouse in the midst of chaos. People know that you are a real one. Anyone can be a critic; anyone can put a smile on when times are good but those who persevere know that their lowest point is not their defining point. Proverbs tells us that the righteous fall seven times and rises again. I don’t know who needs to hear this today but you are not your lowest point. You are not defined by your failures. You are defined by what God says about you. And God sees you and says, “You belong to me.”

Knowing that we belong to God is the ultimate hope. Things will happen, difficult circumstances will arise. But it is good to know, my friends, that we were made to do difficult things. John writes in Revelation 12 that “they (the saints) overcame him (satan) by the blood of the Lamb (Jesus) and by the word of their testimony.” You can’t have a testimony without going through something. So yes, these are difficult times. We have witnessed and survived unspeakable horrors but thanks be to God, these are testimony building times. These are times that grow our faith. These are times that require hope. Even if you have to keep your hope on a tightrope. And we have a responsibility, dear friends, to remind one

another of that hope. To encourage each other in that hope. To make sure that every person we encounter, even folk we don't like, have access to that hope. How we live, our commitment to extending common dignity to everyone we encounter is an opportunity to witness, to become living testimonies that evil has an expiration date. That weeping may come in the night, but joy comes in the morning. God bless you. Amen.

Benediction: Go now freely confessing that you belong to God, are justified by faith, and have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. May this peace you have manifest in the ways you move through the world. May your hope be contagious and draw all people to Christ. Amen.

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