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Meadowbrook Congregational Church  
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“Boasting in Hope”

### **Romans 5:1-11**

<sup>5</sup>Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup>and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup>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.

<sup>6</sup> For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup>Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. <sup>8</sup>But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. <sup>9</sup>Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. <sup>10</sup>For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. <sup>11</sup>But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Introduction- Greetings from your sister churches, here and in other countries. It is good to be with you in Meadowbrook again. Thank you for your continued support for all we do on behalf of member churches. Thank you for your pastor, who for years has served the NA in such excellent ways on our leadership team. Presently, he is on the Congregational Church Development Division, and its chairperson.

Carrie Newcomer has written a song entitled, “My Mama Said It’s True.” The lyrics consist of a string of clichés that parents tell their children. “Bread crust can curl your hair,” “It’s no polite to point in public.” “If everyone else was jumping off a cliff too, you can be sure I won’t let you,” you get the idea.

In our family there were a lot of these mom-isms and dad-isms. So many, that to this day when my rather large family gets together we roar with laughter as we recall them – mostly the ones used by our father. One in particular was when we were all in our adolescent years, and had gotten in some sort of trouble, or as we preferred saying, “When the world was not cooperating with us,” and we were standing in front of our father, a time we affectionately called the judgment seat – he would say “What have you learned from this?”

I’m sure by the time this saying reached the younger ones in the family, it had lost its edge and he would say it in a tone I suspect of resignation that he was not going to get the answer he hoped for.

I hated the phrase. I didn’t want to hear about learning when my backside might still be stinging. In later years we could actually joke about what we might have answered. “Yes, I have father dear. I have learned to wear padding under my seat before I came to the judgment seat.”

Somehow he knew, I think, how inadequate his question was for the circumstance. One does not necessarily analyze the meaning of the act or situation while in it, you know.

Great, I got caught doing something wrong, which stinks, and now he wants me to tell him what I learned from it? How reasonable is that?! At least with my mother, when we did something wrong her clichés had a follow-up more to my liking. She would look me in the eye and hold me in front of her and say, “Tommy, Tommy, Tommy, what am I going to do with you?” And then she would give me that look of parental pain and angst, which struck me to the core, and then pull me to her and surround me with a warm motherly hug, and say, “Tomorrow’s another day.” But Dad, he knew how unreasonable his question was.

We don’t know a whole lot about what the church in Rome was going through at the time of Paul’s letter. Paul himself only had secondhand knowledge of it. He was writing to a church he had not helped establish, to a people he had never met. We can surmise that they were afflicted with a level of first-century church hardship – they were being persecuted. Death, economic woes, temptations to stray from the way, divisions in the church, and the like. In the midst of it, he writes:

We boast in our sufferings, because suffering produces  
Endurance and endurance produces character, and  
Character produces hope.

Did Paul shrug his shoulders as he wrote this, realizing how inadequate these words were to speak to the reality of their suffering? Sounds like his saying needs to go right between my father’s “What did you learn from this,” and “That which does not kill us makes us stronger.” Now, for sure, Paul knew something about suffering. I’ll give him that. But is what he writes supposed to be consoling? Does it help people to get through tough situations, tough times? Should they be encouraged that along the way these things are by-products of disastrous situations?

I would not want to go to the unemployed auto workers of Michigan right now and say, “Tough times builds character.” “Boast in your sufferings.” I would not want to go to the thousands, actually millions who have lost everything in the latest economic scandals and downturns and say, “endurance produces character.”

Remember now he was not talking about some suffering that people endured years ago. He was talking about present tense. Their present suffering. His present experience of suffering. I couldn’t do it. I don’t have it in me to respond to suffering in this way, do you?

The problem is this – I don’t think anyone can talk about such suffering in the abstract. Now maybe we can hear words like love, grace, perhaps even sin and think about them in general terms. But suffering? When you think about a word like suffering, don’t things get pretty graphic for you, really quickly? We see incredible suffering in Iraq, still in Afghanistan, South Africa, Middle East, or more locally, in friends, in our communities these days. Whether global or local we see these examples of suffering and we cradle them in our hands, and then come to this tightly drawn circle that Paul has constructed

- boast in hope
- boast in suffering
- suffering produces endurance
- endurance produces character

And character produces hope, and we are back to hope again! His circle is complete. And we want to place these examples into his tight circle somewhere, and maybe for you they fit. Maybe it's a comfort to be able to orient ourselves and the suffering we experience or see or hear about somewhere that seems, if not safe, then at least manageable. And, this is how this text has been used by the church for years.

We know suffering exists, but by God we tough-minded, hard-working, bootstrap Protestants, can look forward to cultivating endurance, character, and hope. God and sturdy products we can put to some use. That's our idea of how to suffer, right?

But, I admit, I'm suspicious of it. It sounds too easy. The icons of suffering I hold in my hands are not always that easily in that tight a circle. Now, I know that this circle represents our best efforts to make sense of the sovereignty of God but the result seems to me to be unsatisfying.

Heartbreaking because the frontlines of this struggle are in the hospital, the oncologist's office, hospice care, and the funeral services of this world. The tragedy is bad enough, but the relentless search for why, for the explanation that makes sense is what tears many a heart open. When I was a chaplain at Central Maine Medical Center, I visited the cancer ward (instead of what I thought was my assignment – the maternity ward) as part of my daily rounds and after discovering my mistake I turned to leave, and a woman in her seventies asked, "Are you looking for someone dear?" And I said that I was supposed to be in the maternity ward.

She bluntly said, "We're all dying here, sweetie." A green seminary student, first week in Clinical; Pastoral work, and not prepared for such an appraisal of the circumstances, I went back to the pastoral care office and shared my experience with another colleague who comes from a different theological position than I, and he said, "She might have been teaching you something." And I thought, "Wow! What a price for her to pay for my education!"

We hear sentiments like that often. "God had a purpose in this." "We must not question what God had in mind." "I guess God needed so and so in heaven more than we needed her here." "It's all part of God's plan." I'm not about to challenge someone's deeply held belief system. It may be cherished and bring them real comfort. But, it sounds like Paul's circle again, you know? "Suffering, endurance, character, hope." It sounds too much like that is what people say sometimes in suffering because they can't think of any alternative. Is this the best the Christian Church can do in the midst of suffering?

Perhaps you remember the PBS program *Frontline*? Soon after 9-11 they had a segment titled, "Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero." The program was a series of interviews with people who had barely survived or lost loved ones that catastrophic day. "God had a plan" was the most popular sentiment of the group. I can't even imagine their sense of grief and loss. A rabbi was interviewed and said that many were coming to him with questions about the meaning of suffering. He responded, "*I think my job as a rabbi is to help people live with those questions. If God's ways are mysterious, then we have no choice but to live with the mystery. It's upsetting, it's scary, it's painful, it's deep, and it's interesting. But no plan. That's what mystery is. You want a plan? Talk to me about plan, but if you are going to tell me how the plan saved you, you'd better be able to tell me how the plan killed them.*"

Most recently I tuned into a religious television show that I avoid. Thirty seconds is my limit and then I switch the channel. It happened that the host was talking about how this latest economic crisis is a sign of the end times. How it is God's plan to correct the sins of the fathers. How

prophecy is clear that our loss of jobs, homes, economic turmoil is part of the corrective actions of a God who is fed up with humanity's sin. How all this devastation is part of the plan?

So talk to me about a plan, Paul. Talk to me about suffering producing endurance, producing character, producing hope, but I want to also know what you have to say about people who don't ever make it past suffering. What about people who somehow find the ability to endure but the experience has left them utterly broken in spirit. Talk to me about people who scoff at all this talk of hope because hope has disappointed them again, and they are crying out, "How long?" You and I know they are out there. Michigan, I'm sure, has more than its share of those who are out there – you are not abstract examples. Your stories are the ones we cradle in our hands these days.

Maybe we should give Paul a break. He is certainly not the only one who seems to fall prey to convenient categories and paradigms of suffering.

In Rachel Reman's book, *My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge and Belonging*, there is a story of a psychologist named Lois who attended a seminar on Jungian dream interpretation. Carl Jung's grandson was present and one of the panelists. Members of the audience had submitted dreams for the panel to interpret at the end of the seminar the panelists read some of the dreams and discussed them. Lois listened intently to some of the dreams in which the person was subjected to all sorts of horrific torture and atrocities at the hands of Nazi tormentors.

When it was over, Jung's grandson asked the audience to please rise. "*We will stand together in a moment of silence in response to this dream.*" Lois eagerly awaited the moment when someone would interpret the dream. But no comment. Silence. The panel went on to the next dream.

When she talked to a psychologist friend later her friend said, "You know, there is in life a suffering so unspeakable, a vulnerability so extreme that it goes far beyond words, beyond explanation and even beyond healing. In the face of such suffering all we can do is bear witness so no one need suffer alone."

A suffering so unspeakable, vulnerability so extreme, it does not fit in the circle. Unless...unless we take this circle of virtue that Paul seems to have constructed and blow it apart. Unless we take suffering makes you strong mentality and say "No."

After all, where does Paul lodge all this? Right in the middle of his argument about justification. Justification! Not of people who are strong and character-filled and hopeful, but justification of people who are weak, broken, and in despair!

You see? Could it be that what he is saying is "These are those for whom Christ died." Christ died for people who strive for endurance, who try to be independent and strong but cannot be. Christ died for people who try to have good character in the midst of bad situations, bad circumstances, but who fall short again and again.

Could it be, now stay with me, could it be that the answer isn't to ride the circle in some painstaking attempt to give our suffering some structure or meaning? Maybe the answer is to step out of that circle. To give ourselves to a waiting God. To be embraced by a Christ who says, "*I am all the endurance, character and hope that you need.*" It is when we insist that suffering have some meaning, that it produces something or means something, we no longer

need God. We've got the answers. And it bogs us down. It frustrates us. It leaves us thinking we haven't done something we are supposed to be DOING, you know?

I try to endure the suffering but I can't  
I try to pass the test of character but I can't  
I try to have hope but I can't

All this seeking after virtue in the midst of what is a pretty devastating situation is exhausting. It leaves us empty. And perhaps that is the very point at which God's love, compassion, is most welcome. Perhaps we can be filled with THAT this Lenten period. If you are already filled with virtues, and plans, and answers, there is little chance for the love of God to fill you, maybe the rabbi has a point. "No plan, just God" A moment of silence in the wake of unspeakable pain, or loss of hope.

We are counting some devastatingly real, painful, losses these days. It is not merely our economies; it is the attendant extreme sense of loss, lack of answers, and hopelessness. But hope in God has nothing to do with optimism. Its opposite is not pessimism, but despair. I think we get Paul's point. When it seems that we are at our wit's end, hope gives us a chance to boast in God.

May this Lenten period find you boasting more in hope that is deep, and mysterious, and the reason for the season itself.

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Carrie Newcomer, "My Mama Said It's True." Philo Records, 1994

"Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero," Frontline, PBS 2001

Rachel Remer, "My Grandfather's Blessings," Riverhead Books, New York, 2001

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