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Text: Romans 8:18-19

Date: April 5, 2017

Setting: Our Redeemer Lutheran Church (Midweek 5)

Facing Suffering

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

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

“In this world you will have trouble,” Jesus said, “but take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). We WILL suffer in this world. There is no sugar-coating it. As followers of Christ, we are told quite clearly in Scripture that we will have crosses to bear. We will have persecution because of our beliefs. We will have hardships. We will have pain. We will be sad and lonely sometimes. Having faith in Jesus is not taking the easy way out by any means.

We can look to St. Paul for some insights into how to face the suffering we experience as human beings and as followers of Jesus in this world. St. Paul suffered a great deal in his life. He says, “Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:24-29). Talk about suffering! Yet he still was able to say by the Holy Spirit, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (Romans 8:18). And he was even able to say, “For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:10). Sufferings for Paul only made

him bolder to serve the Lord. Paul then makes the remarkable step of saying, “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering 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” (Romans 5:3-5).

We have a Savior who endured great suffering for us. We see in Scripture that even Jesus is not exempt from suffering. He struggled with God’s plan for him in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was arrested. He was abandoned by his closest friends. He was falsely accused of being a blasphemer. He was beaten by soldiers, flogged mercilessly, and forced to wear a crown of thorns on his head and purple robe on his scarred back. And worst of all, his hands and feet were nailed to a cross, on which he endured great agony until he breathed his last. As the prophet Isaiah had said, Jesus truly was the Suffering Servant. “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (Isaiah 53:3). We face suffering, suffering caused by sin. We suffer because of the times that we sin against one another and against God. We also endure suffering that comes as a result of being a disciple of Christ.

What can we learn from Paul and from Christ about how we should face suffering then? It remains clear from Paul’s comments that we should not wallow in our sufferings or consider ourselves somehow cursed or doomed. No, we need to look at our sufferings. Paul says, to look at our sufferings as something that makes us more mature in our beliefs, deeper in our faith and closer to God and others. In the midst of suffering, we find ourselves praying more, reading Scripture more, perhaps thinking more about the spiritual aspect of our lives. Through suffering, we come to understand more fully that we do not control our lives as much as think we do. We must rely on

God more than we initially think we should have to. Suffering can make us more sympathetic to when other people are going through similar situations. We can assure people that even though suffering is difficult, it is not the end of the world. At the end of the world, Jesus will be there to take all our suffering away so that we will be able to rejoice with all those who have suffered through this life as Christ's followers. Followers that now rest in the presence of their Savior. "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." (Rev. 21:4)

Enduring persecution and mocking for being Christian can be one of the toughest burdens to bear, but no matter how bad it gets, we need to remember that even when Jesus was being mocked and ridiculed on the cross, he did not sulk in his suffering. He said, 'Father, forgive them,' and he looked with love on John and his mother and told them to be there for one another. His attitude in suffering was not inward, but outward. That should be our attitude as well. You can look for practical ways that you can still be a witness for your faith even when things are not looking good for you. Reach out to a specific person God has put into your path to help out with a problem. When we look beyond ourselves, our own personal suffering takes a backseat and we have a better view of the big picture, of God's grand design for his people.

Christ has won the victory. His victory over sin, death and the devil means that sufferings will vanish and we will be blessed to be in the presence of our King and our Savior forever and ever. That is the promise made real to us by the cross and through Christ's glorious resurrection. Now go forth and live your life in good times and bad with this future glory as your goal. Amen.

"Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine... to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen." Ephesians 3:20-21