

Third Sunday after Pentecost  
Proper 6  
Year A

Exodus 19:2-8a  
Psalm 100  
Romans 5:1-8  
Matthew 9:35 - 10:8

Last week, I said that it was not a question of the quantity of our faith, but where our faith was focused, in whom we put our faith. When the disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith, He responded with the parable of the mustard seed.

Today, Paul discusses another aspect of our faith – that while our faith is firmly grounded in what God has done for us through Jesus Christ, that peace which we experience in God does not shield us from suffering. It is through the suffering of Jesus that we are able to experience the grace and peace of God. Therefore, we should not be surprised when we experience suffering.

You might think that we don't suffer like the Christians of the first century suffered, and you would be right. But, we still suffer. It might take the appearance of anxiety, or stress, or any other psychological or physical distress, but it is still suffering. When Paul says that we should boast in the hope of our suffering, he is expressing the thought that, even though we do suffer, we know that God is there with us.

Paul continues with our growth through experiences we have in our walk with God. Suffering produces endurance, which produces character, which produces hope. Suffering is not an end unto itself, but a steppingstone in our experience of grace. If we get bogged down in our suffering, where is the hope? If our only reaction to suffering is, "Woe is me!", there is no hope. But, when we follow the advice of Paul and boast in our suffering, it is in God that we are boasting, because our faith in God will produce the results we seek. We only need to trust our faith in God.

When Jesus looked out at the crowds surrounding Him, He saw a great harvest field, a large flock of sheep that were suffering because they needed a shepherd. He turned to the disciples and gave them the charge to do something about it – to be the shepherds that flock needed. The need has not changed, nor has the solution.

As I study the history of the Episcopal Church in this state, I read case after case where the people experienced the same issues we see today. At one point, when finances became very tight, the bishop even had to take on the role of rector of one of the churches so he could feed his family because the diocese couldn't pay him. Church after church went for long periods of time without clergy because there was no money. But, in spite of this, the church flourished. People stepped up and did their part because they knew that God was with them and that their suffering and perseverance would lead them to the solution.

Our hope is strengthened by our suffering. Although our faith may be tiny, our God is great and that is where we place our faith. We know God has a plan for us. We know we have a ministry in this place. While none of us, individually, has the answer, we all have the power to impact the solution. As we pray for God's direction for our ministry in this area, our faith is released to grasp that ministry and make it happen. It is by faith that we walk this walk with God.