

## The Road that Leads to Glory! 6 Pentecost A

“We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 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.”  
(Romans 5:2b-5)

There are few places in scripture that promotes God's people have bragging rights. Bragging usually infers pride. The first bragging right is God's people are on the road to the glory of God. The first is contingent on the second bragging right: they should brag about their sufferings. When you put boasting on these subjects - God's glory and our sufferings perhaps bragging does not seem so out of place. The apostle Paul gives Christian disciples a road map to God's glory and suffering is the first requirement.

As a Christian, suffering should be an obvious path on the trail to God. In the creeds “Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried.” There you have it. Jesus did not suffer so we would not have to – Jesus suffered so we would know to expect it and welcome it ourselves. To those who believe Jesus in his humanity did not want to die I say hogwash! He was born to die. He came to be the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world. He did not shy away from suffering and neither should God's people.

If suffering is the first path on the trail to God then the next step is endurance. Where does endurance come from? Hopefully, it comes from experience with suffering. Stamina will be required of Olympiads this summer. They did not get this suddenly. It is built up over time. The endurance to finish a foot race begins with short distances and increases with time and practice.

When I first started running my Physical Fitness Test in the Navy it took a lot of training to bring my time in the 1.5 mile run from 13 minutes to 10:15 – the best time I ever made. Yet it took over a year to accomplish this. Because one is a Christian from birth does not mean it is okay to retire at age 65 or when Medicare kicks in. Let me tell you about Polycarp, a bishop of ancient Turkey. At a ripe old age of 86 he answered the proconsul who urged him to save his life by cursing Christ. He replied with the words,

"Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" He could have gotten a lesser punishment than death if he only had plead mercy.

On this past Trinity Sunday, Fr Smith whispered to me, that he wanted to die behind the altar. Endurance is a gift from God to stay the course even after Medicare goes into effect, even when gas prices go up to \$5/gallon, even as climate change gets worse. Exodus 19:4 we are encouraged by God's promise to His people: "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." When we are tired and weary don't give up – "but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with **wings** like **eagles**, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint" Isaiah 40:31.

I feel tired some mornings and I don't want to exercise. I get to Mercy Hospital on Wednesdays and I know I should take the steps up to Mercy Manor instead of the elevator. I get to the floor and I'm huffing away out of breath for a few minutes. It makes me think how well will I do in my spiritual walk with God unless I exercise my soul regularly?

The apostle Paul continues to write that if suffering produces endurance then endurance is sure to produce character. That was not words for the apostle who endured much for Christ. He suffered a lot for his faith. He gives an account of the roadmap in his life in 2 Corinthians 11:22 ff – lashings, beatings, a stoning, shipwrecked, adrift at sea, dangers from bandits, rivers (sounds familiar), sleeplessness and hunger.

Character education was big in public schools back in the 80's and 90's. Is it still? Has it done much good? How can we build character in children without values? How can you have value without virtue? And given the meaning of virtue (veritas or truth) how can you have virtue without the knowledge of God? And if parents are no longer giving such knowledge to their children are they getting it in religious institutions? We received the children of America in the military and often we saw little evidence of God in the lives of the 18 – 21 year old recruits. It was not until they suffered and endured that they got some character. In the Navy, we called it re-parenting! How sad it took so long.

Anne Lamott writes about what most of us don't like to think about. She wrote her first novel for her father, the writer Kenneth Lamott, when he was diagnosed with brain cancer. She has said that

the book was “a present to someone I loved who was going to die.” In all her novels, Anne Lamott writes about loss – loss of loved ones and loss of personal control. She doesn’t try to sugar-coat the sadness, frustration and disappointment, but tells her stories with honesty, compassion and a pureness of voice. Anne Lamott says, “I have a lot of hope and a lot of faith and I struggle to communicate that.”

The author tells why she makes her teenage son, Sam, go to church ... “I make him go because I can ... I outweigh him by nearly 75 pounds. But that is only part of it. The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want — which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy — are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray, or practice their faith — people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful.”

— Anne Lamott, “Why I make Sam go to church” in *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (Anchor, 2000), 100.

As disciples of Jesus Christ we model for one another what it means to learn this path to God’s glory. It is done in community. The disciples learned from each other as well as from Jesus. It was not done one disciple at a time in isolation. Jesus gathered the twelve knowing that one of them would try to sabotage the faith journey of the others. His school was based on what suffering could teach them. That is what church is supposed to be – a school where people share everything.

In 1727, Benjamin Franklin invited 12 of his friends to form a club in Philadelphia dedicated to mutual improvement. It was known as the Junto Society (pronounced *who-n-toe*). They met one evening a week to discuss topics of the day. The members recommended books, friends and shopkeepers to each other and fostered self-improvement through discussions in the fields of philosophy, morals, economics and politics. But the results were not limited to the participants, because those men went out and influenced public opinion. What’s more, on a very practical level, the Junto Society gave rise to America’s first library, first public hospital, volunteer fire departments, police departments, paved streets and the University of

Pennsylvania. The society lasted in its original form for 40 years and eventually became the nucleus of the American Philosophical Society, which is still in existence today.

Sufferings producing Endurance producing Character producing Hope is not a luxury society can do without. And of all places the church must take the lead by educating and forming its people.

Character produces hope. People who are grounded in their beliefs abound in hope. Hope is what is not yet, what we can't see but we believe it can exist and can be achieved. People of character give hope to others. It's contagious. And when the Christian faith is contagious other people want what you have.

What ever trial you may find yourself in, whatever may be wearing you out, look deep within and see if the character of Christ is not growing in you. I am hopeful it is. And godly hope will continue to lead us forward as disciples of Jesus Christ. That hope will open more and more our hearts to the love of God in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit will encourage you on your path and not disappoint you. Bishop Polycarp, frail as he was, was not disappointed.

Semper Fidelis! Amen.