

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
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Can God Be Trusted, Still?
Romans 5:1-5
June 20, 2010
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I preached this sermon for the first time on June 10, 2001. We had been here about 8 months. The excitement of our move from Birmingham, AL closer to home – only 2 hours away from family as opposed to the 6-7 hour drive – was a welcomed perk to our new job. But the excitement of this new time in our lives was laced with deep pain and grief. It had just been about a year and a half since my family’s life changed forever. My 16 year old nephew was killed in a car accident. He spent 8 days unconscious in ICU before the declaration of “brain dead.” Eight days like that has a powerful impact on a family and everything from then on can be placed in one of two places on a timeline: before Kevin’s death and after. But someone requested that I preach this sermon. In an email she said, “This is one of my very favorite sermons (ever) . . . as many people go through economic uncertainty, unemployment and personal loss . . . and the bad things that invariably happen to each of us . . . this sermon to me offers words to help us cope . . .) So as we face continued wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, an economy that is wreaking havoc on everyone, an oil spill of unbelievable proportions in the Gulf of Mexico, and all of our own personal burdens, nine years later it’s a worthy question: Can God be trusted, still?

When I read the passage from Romans, I was transported back to Richland Memorial Hospital in Columbia, SC. It was one of the last days of February 1999. I was standing in a circle holding hands with about 15-20 people in the Intensive Care waiting

room, and Russ was praying. He or I had already prayed so many prayers. I felt as though I had nothing left to say, yet my sister wanted us to keep praying – every 2 hours – after a visit with my unconscious 16 year old nephew who had been in a terrible car accident. So, every 2 hours we circled up, and we prayed. We had been there around the clock for about 3 or 4 days when Russ prayed, “We boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and . . .” and I could hear a voice in my head screaming “don’t say it, don’t say it, don’t say it . . .” and then he said it, “and hope does not disappoint us.” My only hope was that Kevin would live and yet somewhere deep down inside I knew that he wouldn’t. And he didn’t. And I knew that I would be disappointed. And I am. And every time I hear the rhythm of: suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope, I want to close my ears because I know what’s coming next: and hope will not disappoint us. Frankly, that’s just not been my experience. I have been disappointed in hope. And more than I have been disappointed in hope, I have been witness to people who know far greater disappointment than I. And it all made me ask the question, “Can God be trusted?”

The people of the Old Testament thought that Yahweh could be trusted and that those who place their trust in Yahweh would not be disappointed. Theirs was not a fragile hope. (Year C Lectionary Help) It was strong and sturdy and endured much more than I would have ever put up with. And I wonder where that kind of trust comes from? They said “God is trustworthy” therefore everyone believed it to be true and this self-perpetuating belief found itself coming out of Paul’s mouth to the Romans and they all just believed it, no questions asked?! Surely not. Surely, I’m not the only one to ever be

disappointed in hope. Surely, I'm not the only one to wonder about the trust level of God. Surely not.

It's interesting, in spending this week concentrating on hope and trust, it seems everything I have seen and read have used the words hope and trust. My file on hope and trust are full. I'll share a just of the few things I learned this week.

First, in order to hope, we must tell the truth and trust God with it. At the time I wrote this sermon, Donna Forrester, a friend of mine and an Associate Pastor at FBC, Greenville, SC, had just been diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor. They removed a tennis ball size tumor and she was recovering at home while keeping many friends and colleagues abreast of her situation through an online journal. Donna's area of ministry was Pastoral Care and Counseling. Though hopeful, the prognosis was grim. She was 51 years old at the time. As a recent moderator for the national Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, she was obviously a very well-known woman and minister in Baptist circles, and it was interesting to follow her daily journal as she let us eavesdrop on her private thoughts. I think it is interesting to see how a pastoral counselor processes their own stuff. There's much we could learn here. Listen to this past Wednesday's journal entry.

Early this morning when I was feeling so bad I took my blood pressure and it was a bit high. I laid back down and began to pray. It feels good to know that I don't have to say pious words that we are often taught, but that I can trust God with the truth. There is nothing so intimate as truthful prayer and to trust God with that kind of intimate truth makes me feel even closer. After about 15 minutes I took my blood pressure again and it was down considerably and the pain in my head was easing. I have always known in the power of prayer, but there is something about experiencing it at this level that has me, as

my good friend Glenn Hinson would say, in “slack-jawed amazement.” God hears, is so close and answers even the whiny prayers of God’s own children. I continue to learn so much about myself, about God, about my family and friends . . . I am truly blessed.

Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope . . . and hope does not disappoint us. Donna is telling the scary truth – to us and to God. In order to know about hope, we must learn to tell the truth about our suffering and our disappointment – to tell the truth about our fears and our anxieties – to tell the truth about what lies behind our tears or what lies behind our inability to cry. God can indeed be trusted with the truth. (I must add that Donna is still alive today, though she has not lived with the full amount of energy she had before the brain tumor. And just last week I saw a prayer request in an Alliance of Baptists newsletter for Donna. She has recently suffered a mild stroke.)

Secondly, in order to hope, we must be able to remember. Well-known scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann says, “Memory produces hope in the same way amnesia produces despair.” In a speech to the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies, Brueggemann says:

We Jews and Christians are people who recall the defining memories and miracles of their lives. We hope in and trust that the God who has done past acts of transformation and generosity will do future acts of transformation and generosity. (He continues) By a profound . . . trust, Jews affirm that the deep sense of loss of Jerusalem did not disrupt God’s power and resolve in the world. By a profound . . . faith, Christians affirm that the deep loss in the death of Jesus did not disrupt God’s power and resolve in the world. And that is the key issue in hope.

Paul's word to the Romans is the speech of a community that refuses to give in . . . it is the speech of a community that knows that God is not finished. (Brueggemann) The God who has been about working good wherever and whenever God can will again work good wherever and whenever God can. I believe God can be trusted with that. That is not to say that our each and every hope will be fulfilled. It is to say that when I remember how God has worked in the past, I have hope and trust in what is to come – even as I struggle through disappointments along the way.

Thirdly, in order to hope, we must be willing to look for whatever good can be found along the way. Chuck Poole, in his book Don't Cry Past Tuesday, says we must "be able to wring whatever good can be wrung from the hardest of hard things and then, having wrung the good out of the bad, walk on with hope into whatever is left of life." John Claypool, a Baptist-turned-Episcopal-priest, tells the story of a beautiful plum tree that stood for years in his grandfather's yard. His grandfather loved that plum tree – he was proud of it and everyone knew it. One day a tornado swept through the farm and twisted that plum tree from its roots and left it dead on the ground. As neighbors began coming out of their hiding places after the tornado, they all began to gather in Claypool's grandfather's yard around what was left of the prized plum tree. Finally, one man asked the grandfather – what are you going to do with the tree? After a long pause, the old man replied – I'm going to pick the fruit and burn the rest. (Don't Cry Past Tuesday)

Even in suffering, good can be found. Sometimes it may take an all-out search, but we must seek to find whatever good there is and take it with us with a little more hope for the future.

Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us. But the sentence does not stop there. And that is the good news. Paul says that 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.” That, my friends, has been my experience. I have experienced the love of God – even in the disappointment of hope.

I have been honest in my feelings of anger and grief and disappointment in my nephew’s death. I have found that God can handle that better than family. Ten years later, the pain is as close as yesterday, yet time has proven to be a help. I have a vivid memory of God’s presence in my life in the past – even during those days of suffering – and I trust that God continues to be with me doing God’s best to work for good. I have been able to wring some good out of the bad – my already close relationship with my sister and brother-in-law is even closer, they have a new outlook – a better, healthier set of priorities in life, I have become more aware of the deep pain of grief that hopefully will enable me to be a better minister. (Don’t get me wrong – I’d trade all of that good for Kevin to be back with us – in a heartbeat – but I’m trying to find ways to move on in hope.) And of course I live with a Blessed Hope that somehow, even today, Kevin knows the joy of riding in a 1965 Mustang (his dream car) and eating all the sweets he wants without ever having a shot of insulin and is free from burdens that can make teenage life so difficult. A Blessed Hope. I trust God with that.

Can God be trusted, still? I think “yes”. I believe “yes.” Most of all, I hope “yes.” I can’t prove it but I believe it and that’s why it’s called faith. Donna Forrester’s Friday journal entry said this:

God loves me. God wants the very best for me. God will always be with me. Right now I need something as simple as this to hang onto – and I am. All I have seen teaches me to trust the creator for that which I cannot see and does not make sense to me. So even with tears of anger, facing the unknown and not understanding . . . I TRUST.
(uppercase) *I close this day thankful for today, trusting and hopeful for tomorrow.*

May it be so.