

Suffering's Byproducts
 Psalm 8 Romans 5:1-5
 May 30, 2010 J. S. O'Neill

Psalm 8

O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. ² Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger. ³ When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; ⁴ what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? ⁵ Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. ⁶ You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, ⁷ all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, ⁸ the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. ⁹ O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Romans 5:1-5

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

I was watching ESPN while eating my lunch recently and some talking heads were reminiscing about great players of the past. One told the story about Stan Musial, famous St. Louis Cardinal's baseball slugger, who accumulated 475 homerooms during his career back in the 40's and 50's. Musial comes to the plate against a rookie pitcher. The catcher signaled for a fastball, and the pitcher shook him off. So, the catcher signaled for a curveball, and again the pitcher shook him off. The catcher gave signs for one of the pitcher's specialties, and still the hurler hesitated. So, the catcher trots out to the mound and says, "I've called for every pitch in the book! What do you want to throw this guy?" "Nothing," was the pitcher's shaky reply, "I just want to hold on to the ball as long as I can."

That's the way we feel about life. We want to hang on to it, protect it, reserve and coddle it, not hurl ourselves into the fray where we could suffer, be wounded and changed. Recently, I visited my doctor for a physical exam. He's one of these guys who, when you first lay eyes on him, makes you want to shout, "Go away and send in a grown-up!" A competent fellow, despite his looking as though he was still in high school, announced that I was in great shape...and then the smarty pants added, "...for a person your age."

Whatever age we have reached, we probably feel some ambivalence about it.

When we're young, we can't wait to grow up. When older, we wistfully long for the vigor of our youth. We can never quite get things right. A mentor of mine once told me that when you're twenty you worry about what other people are thinking about you. When you're forty, you don't care what other people think. When you turn sixty you realize they haven't been thinking about you, at all.

We live in a strongly age-ambivalent culture which seems to look forward to the day when – wrinkle and cellulite free, our true age hidden beneath countless cosmetic, surgical, and emotional cover-ups – we will only vaguely remember that the quality of a life must be measured in depth, not length. So, at first blush Jesus' talk of everlasting life appeals to us greatly, but when he describes the cost in securing it, our enthusiasm evaporates. In this kind of life we love most what we'll lose and casually discard what is durable. Too late we learn. Schopenhauer said, "A person must have grown old and lived long in order to see how short life is." Long or short, the issue, of course, is how shall we live it? Do we hold on to life as long as we can, or do we put it in play?

Our faith teaches that life is a process and at each and every point along that process we are infinitely valuable in God's sight; that each stage in life has a purpose and significance whether we are young, old, or in between; that we are meant to grow up and grow old, and birth and death are not the poles between which we are suspended, but the circuit we walk whose center is God. Given this spiritual geometry, are we to live for ourselves or for others – for our own sakes' or for goodness' sake?

Consider the Apostle Paul's words: *...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....* To our modern American ears, this is an offensive passage, is it not? It flies against the myth of the age, that there is an anodyne for every pain, a cure (if we can but find it) for every ill, that it is some kind of sin to be unhappy and our own fault if we are sad, and if something has gone wrong there is someone to blame.

Consider that in the original Greek of the New Testament, the word translated *suffering* is the same one the Gospel of Matthew uses when Jesus warns his disciples that they will be *tortured* as they continue his ministry after his crucifixion. Is the Apostle Paul trying to give suffering a good name? Is he an apologist for pain, a PR guy putting a spin on agony?

No, he is reflecting on what happened to Jesus and, for that matter, contemplating his own fate. He is not being masochistic, nor suggesting a holier-than-thou posture toward others, as some people who, as my grandfather used to say, "Enjoy ill health..." for the sake of gaining attention and sympathy of others. He is making a spiritual point about the nature of life, as well as affirming a central truth.

And, in part, his point has to do with Christianity's realism about life. As a Jewish proverb has it, "As soon as a baby is born, he is old enough to die." Life is finite; we are not going to get out of it alive. Furthermore, life is fraught with ambiguity and ambivalence; it is an illusion to believe we are going to create a different kind of world than the one we've already got. To have faith is to not be in denial about all of this.

Paul insists that no matter what peril we face, God is with us. Despite our error,

God is with us. Whether full of ourselves and lost in our pleasures, or desperate and dire and grieving our losses, God is with us. The word translated *character* in the passage is the Greek for *having been tested*, or in the jargon of our day, *vetted*. Our hope does not disappoint us; our faith has been vetted; God's love has been poured into our hearts.

The Gospel does not promise us that if we are faithful we will not get sick, or that we will live forever, or that we will escape any of the distressing conditions or deeply painful experiences of life. Accidents will befall us, sicknesses will infect us; bones, promises, and hearts will be broken; stresses will fracture our minds, passions will fracture our relationships. But, God will be with us. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not a talisman against fate. Faith is not the confidence that we will live free of pain and loss, but that in our pain and loss we will never be abandoned.

Paul, who himself would be one of those disciples who ended up tortured and executed by authorities bent on stamping out any faith other than faith in them, would approve Joan Chittister's advice to all of us who face illness, death, loss, and disappointment. "Let go of unwavering answers. Let go of present achievements. Let go of life's little hoards of trinkets. Let go of the now which is frozen in emotion for the sake of a future freed from old chains. ... (Spiritual) discernment is based on the awareness that we cannot always have what we want...but that there is enduring, sometimes hidden, always surprising spiritual value in what we do have."

The mentality of our day destroys the unity of life and fractures it into pieces. Religion forgets that persons have bodies, and so our worship and praise tends to become overly spiritualized, disembodied, sexless, and unearthly. Science forgets that we are persons of soul, so health-care becomes a matter of virus management, chemical balance, genetic manipulation, and parts replacement. The totality of life, however, is not the sum of our parts. When Christians ask, "Who are we, really?" we are asking, "To whom do we belong? With whom are we in relationship?" To be created in the image of God is to say we are in communion with the God of wondrous mystery who cares for us.

Life, therefore, is a calling and a cause propelled by the grace which makes life not only possible but good. As the church, we are called to participate in the healing ministry of Christ, to love the world in all its fumbling, fractured ways, to lovingly redirect those who work without purpose, those who suffer without cause, those who strive without vision, and squander their strength in worry and fret that God is alive and acting in our midst, that we abide by a hope that will not disappoint, the boast that God is with us still.

William Sloane Coffin, as he neared his own death due to a debilitating disease about which medicine could do no more, wrote in his book *Credo*, "There is a Zen paradox whereby we may lack everything yet want for nothing. The reason is that peace, that is, deep inner peace, comes not with meeting our desires but in releasing ourselves from their power. I find such peace is increasingly mine. It's not that I feel I'm withdrawing from the world, only that I am present in a different way. I'm less intentional than 'attentional.' I'm more and more attentive to family and friends and to nature's

beauty. Although still outraged by callous behavior, particularly in high places, I feel more often serene, grateful for God's gift of life. For the compassions that fail not, I find myself saying daily to my loving Maker, 'I can no other answer make than thanks, and thanks, and ever thanks.'

Fulfillment in life remains elusive when we spend more of our energy protecting our lives than expending them. The more devoted we are to harboring what we have, to keeping at bay the advancing years, to the avoidance of the messy details of working for what is right, the more miserly we become with our love and hope. To grow old is to grow up, and to grow up is to learn that what life lacks in length must be made up for in depth.

What vets us, finally, is demonstrating the character of hope by touching each other's lives, by getting ourselves out of the way and allowing God's love to flower in justice and goodness, by learning that love must be shared or it cease to be love. I've always liked Shel Silverstein's poem *The Little Boy and the Old Man*, where the very young and the very old find their lives touchingly intersecting. The boy confesses that he sometimes drops his spoon, wets his pants, and cries. The old man hears that confession and admits that he too has those problems sometimes. The little boy confides that worst of all is the pain he feels when grownups don't pay attention to him. His companion reaches out, and the boy feels the warmth of a "wrinkled old hand," and the old man says to the little boy, "I know what you mean."

Life begins in the sharing of life, not in holding on to it. If we would be persons of great faith, we must know one another's burdens, mutually bear them, and offer up our lives and our love as a sacrifice upon the altar of hope.