

Roadmap

06-14-2020 Sermon

Sit back and relax! We are going to be taking a little spiritual road trip, with the scripture passage from Romans 5: 1-8 as our guide. We're going to be using our spiritual GPS app in the process of making that journey, so prepare to download and initiate that app.

It's a good thing that I will be using my spiritual GPS app on this journey. Donna can affirm that my relationship with a "normal" travel GPS app, like Waze or Google Maps, is not typically very productive. The app has plotted out the path to the destination, and the app's annoying sweet voice gives me helpful hints. "In 200 yds., turn right on Foggy Bottom Rd." Okay, let's make that right turn, I say, to which the sweet voice replies "Recalculating", to which my reply is *\$%#@!!^#@, to which the app voice sweetly replies "Now, that's going on your permanent record".

But I digress! I'm going to fire up the spiritual GPS app now and we'll begin our journey. Oh my, I must have unintentionally logged out of the application the last time I used it. It's prompting me for a password! Now, where is that piece of paper with all my passwords. Oh well, let me try something JESUSCHRIST. That's it! The password! I'm ready to use the app now.

I have direct access to God now, and we can plan our spiritual trip. But, of course, we only need that one password, Jesus, to get access to God in the course of life's spiritual travels.

In Paul's addressing his letter to the Roman Christians, he was writing to people who were desperately trying to find passwords that would grant them access to God – careful obedience to the law of Moses, civic virtue, depth of philosophical knowledge, etc., etc. The same might be said of many of us today.

In verses 1 and 2 of Romans 5 we hear eloquently of our status once we have that access: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand".

Barb Pratt has been leading a Lenten adult Sunday school class series, based on the video study "He Chose the Nails", by Max Lucado, which was rudely interrupted for ten weeks by the virus lockdown. In last week's session we heard about two types of sanctification, the first of which is called "positional sanctification", the process of being sanctified, made holy, not based on any of our actions, our status, our privilege, our good works, but rather based on who we know – Jesus, the one and only password we need.

Accepting that one password, we grasp that we are not really striving to reach God, but that God is striving to reach us. In this week's daily reflections in the Upper Room

Disciplines, based on this passage from Romans 5, a book by theologian Paul Tillich was mentioned, the title of which is “Accept That We are Accepted”. It’s confounding, at times, how challenging that simple acceptance can be. We are shaped by a gift we can never achieve but can only receive.

So, returning to our spiritual GPS analogy, as noted in verse 1 of the Romans 5 passage, our home base is on “Grace Avenue”. Grace is our spiritual dwelling place, the grace in which we stand as believers.

Returning to the end of verse 2, ...”and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God”. This is not “hope” as in “wish” or “wishful thinking”, but rather more like “confidence”, or even “certainty”. So “Grace Avenue” is in the community of “Hope”, so we can enter our home coordinates into the spiritual GPS app.

Now let’s move forward to verse 3 of the Romans 5 passage, and things get decidedly more challenging. “And not only that, but” Don’t you just hate it when there is a “but” in a sentence. Everything so far has been going so well, boasting in our hope and confidence of sharing the glory of God. What’s with the “but” already?

Well, ... “but we also boast in our sufferings”. Seriously, we should boast in our suffering? Generally speaking, we often attempt to go to great lengths to avoid any suffering. But this letter was, after all, written by Paul, who was more than acquainted with suffering, with shipwrecks, and imprisonments, and the like.

Many times during the span of our lives, we take a journey from our spiritual home in “Hope” to the community called “Suffering”. Most often, we don’t do the driving on that trip. At times, the trip to “Suffering” takes an extended time, but on other occasions the trip is over in an instant of time.

Using the spiritual GPS analogy, we find ourselves in “Suffering”, and the bridge spanning the river along the short route back to “Hope” has been washed out by the storm we have experienced.

I would anticipate that we will remember these past three months, and the near future, of living in the shadow of the pandemic for the rest of our lives. I certainly wouldn’t suggest that every aspect of our recent experiences qualifies as “suffering”. We’ve learned a lot about reaching out to others virtually, maybe picked up some new “techie” skills, cooked some new dishes, planted the first home garden in years, at least begun to clean out the garage.

However, much of the last three months has been filled with some level of fear, anxiety, grief – a range of emotions that has been all over the map, changing from day to day, or often more frequently – fear, confusion, anger, disillusionment, disappointment, disbelief, rage, debilitating fear, even bemusement.

I personally don’t know anyone who has been seriously sickened or died as a result of the coronavirus, but I’ll guess that at least some of us do. I have a niece who, as part of

her career endeavors, attended a business conference meeting in India in mid-December 2019, which included attendees from all around Southeast Asia, Two weeks after she returned to California she described experiencing the worst “cold” she could remember over the Christmas holiday, and two weeks later my sister-in-law related the same type of illness experience. My niece has since taken an antibodies test, and, though accuracy of some of the test methods is in question, the test came back positive for coronavirus antibodies. She may have unwittingly been among the first wave of people to bring the virus to the USA, first to California, then to Georgia over the holidays.

Some of the wrenching experiences we have all likely suffered during these troubling times:

- Our own fears of contracting the coronavirus, and our uncertainty about how effective the methods of protecting ourselves can be,
- The grief of feeling that we can't physically embrace, or even be in close proximity to family members who don't live in our homes, or close friends.
- Not being able to visit our ill family members or friends in the hospital, or in senior care facilities,
- Not even being able to collectively, and intimately grieve for loved ones and dear friends who have passed away in these months,
- Being unable to travel to be with distant relatives, or have them travel to visit us, because of the severe travel restrictions,
- Delaying needed diagnostic medical procedures, or not seeking medical help for chronic conditions, frightened of contracting the virus in a medical facility.

Frankly, boasting about these recent sufferings hasn't been really high on my to-do list!

Pastor Leith Andersen has said that: “Suffering is today's forgotten value”. Come again – a value, a virtue? Just how does that work out?

Let's return again to our spiritual GPS analogy and hear what directions we're given in Romans 5: 3-5 as a roadmap. We're marooned in the community of “Suffering”, the bridge has been washed out. How do we get back again to our home base in “Hope”, again standing joyfully in the peace and grace of God? What “towns” do we need to pass through, what turns to make?

Listen now to the roadmap directions given in verses 3 and 4: “... but (there's that word again!) we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.”

So, we venture from “Suffering” to the town of “Endurance”, which is some parts is also known as “Patience”. I think it would be fair to say, that in the third decade of the 21st century neither patience nor endurance are among today's stronger or more prevalent virtues. I can reinforce that perspective from my own personal tendencies. This portion

of the return trip to “Hope” may be a bit challenging, with some twists and unplanned wrong turns.

The next leg of the journey takes us to the crossroad called “Character”. Much has been written about what constitutes the makeup of a Christian life of character, and what experiences lead to growth in Christian character. The wrong turns in the journey to achieving endurance and patience, those hard-earned lessons, are certainly an important part of that path. How can I learn to make good decisions? Make some bad decisions!

The final direction from our spiritual GPS takes us from the crossroad of “Character” back to home, sweet home in “Hope”, standing again in the glory of God.

Suffering is the catalyst for this journey, however, and hope, confidence if you will, is still the terminal point of the journey, the hope of sharing in God’s glory.

This passage in verses 3-4 is really a pretty good description of the second type of sanctification mentioned in the “He Chose the Nails” Lenten study – progressive sanctification. We can’t do anything to improve upon, or embellish positional sanctification – that is completed once, accepting God’s precious gift to us. But (there’s that word again!) over the course of our life’s experiences we can, and need to mature our faith as Christian believers, moving from suffering to patience to endurance to character to standing again in God’s glory.

To complete the thoughts in verse 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”. Suffering-fueled hope does not disappoint us, it fulfills us.

To conclude the sermon today, there’s no better closing than verses 6-8, which beautifully describe that gift to us. “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person - though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”

By the way, if you haven’t yet downloaded the spiritual GPS app, I highly recommend it!

Amen.

Elder Kurt Schuler

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