

Boasting in Hope – A Strawberry Festival Sermon
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer M Gingras
June 16, 2019

Romans 5:1-5

Once upon a time a chemistry professor figured out how to make experimental “knowledge in-a-pill” pills. She was so excited that she told her freshman chemistry class about them.

After class a student came up to speak with her, curious about what kind of knowledge pills were available. The professor said: “Well, the first one I created was a pill for English Literature.” To the student’s surprise, she went on to ask “You want to try it?” The freshman nodded yes, swallowed the pill and instantly acquired new knowledge about English Literature.

“Wow! That’s great! What else do you have?” he asked. “Well I have pills for art history, biology, and world history,” replied the pharmaceutical genius. “Hang on,” the student asked “What about math? Do you have a pill for that?”

The professor said, “I think so, let me check” opened up a nearby cabinet, took out a pill the size of a grapefruit and set it on the counter. “Here ya go!” “Woah!” the student replied, “I have to take that huge pill for math?” “Yes,” the professor said, “I’m afraid that math will always be hard to swallow.”

We’d all like an instant (or maybe an easier) way of accumulating knowledge, especially in those subject areas that don’t come naturally to us.

But knowledge (especially about a subject like math) requires time and effort and ability. The teachers among us know that what we learn and retain is an accumulation of past and present tidbits of information, which basically never ends.

Today is a day in which the wider church recognizes as Trinity Sunday, which is just a fancy way of saying that we take time in worship to think about how the Holy One exists within the context of relationships: Three in one, One in three... Father, Son, Holy Spirit – Creator, Christ, Advocate - they don’t make a pill for advanced theological knowledge either.

Learning about anything – secular or divine - happens through all manner of sources. We learn by doing and re-doing. All sorts of experiences, both positive or negative, provide us with what we need to grow as people. And here at MCC, we attempt to provide positive experiences and grow in knowledge about God in positive ways.

And I appreciate all the leaders, teachers and volunteers in our faith formation programs who help with religious knowledge, especially how you model how to be caring and compassionate and loving. You are ALL so wonder-full. We are born to wonder. At its core, that's really what any study of God really is, wonder.

Some words don't translate well from one language to another. One of those words is the Greek word in Paul's letter today that is usually translated as "boast". It usually means to lift oneself up, often with some vanity involved. We can boast about our kids and how smart they are, our sports teams and their winning seasons, or how we have reached a personal goal.

But Paul talks about boasting in our hopes and our sufferings in his letter to the Romans. And I wonder what he means by that.

Do you want to know a secret? I boast "in hope" about this church all the time. Your heart for serving, your care for one another, your talents, what you are able to do together, all of it shines particularly bright today. I've tried to explain to my foster daughter what this weekend would be like for her, and words fail. You love your church, you love your community, and it shows.

But, reading this passage earlier this week I was thinking more about what it means to "boast in our sufferings", and what that might have to do with this weekend. I don't think it's about comparing ourselves to someone else, or wondering whether we are having a worse time at the moment than anyone else (as if that can be measured).

I think that what Paul is trying to say that we can be lifted up, even in our moments of suffering, through interactions in a faith community. These because those are precisely the times when we might feel the love from other people most tangibly. Being cared for through our struggles helps keep us going, persevering as we seek relief from pain or worry, or as we navigate through grief, or put in action some needed change.

And I know that some of you are suffering right now. You are tired – this weekend, and the weeks leading up to it, can really take a lot out of us. Maybe this is the first time you’ve sat down and prayed for a while. Perhaps you’re thinking about someone in your life who is need of healing, or maybe that person in need of healing is you.

When I heard “River in Judea” this morning, I thought about how much I miss those who could not be here today, either because they have gone home to God or they live halfway around the world. Maybe you feel that way too. That’s why so many of us stick tissues up our sleeves, we know the emotions are going to come.

My wish for all of us is that we feel lifted up by each other today, whatever pains – physical, emotional, spiritual - we may be carrying. That when your feet are hurting and you need a break, that someone will be there to assist you or pass you a cool drink of water. That you’ll keep caring for each other as well as you can, through any tough moments the future brings. So that every one of us will see this day as a joyful opportunity to share God’s love in community.

Martin Luther famously observed that suffering does not give us patience; but only reveals whether or not we have patience. Our true character is revealed in times of suffering. When that character is grounded in the love and acceptance by a loving God, then we will be reflecting that love in the core of our character.

Love, however, demands that we do not react simply to our own pain. A spirit touched by love cannot be callous to the suffering of others. There is certainly enough pain in the world to go around. But when we love one another, granting each other dignity and worth, then our boasting in our suffering will compel us forward. That’s the hope, anyway.

May the One God who is with you in all the time and in all things, especially in moments of discovery and wonderment, suffering and resiliency be with you today and always, and with us all. AMEN!