

Finding God in the Arena

Romans 5: 1-5

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; and 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.

Our 26th president, Theodore Roosevelt, once gave a speech about character development. He said, our character is not formed by being critical and pointing out other's mistakes or saying we could do the job better than someone else. Instead, "Credit belongs to the one who is actually *in the arena*, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood...who at best knows...the triumph of high achievement, and who at worst, if fails, at least fails while daring greatly." St. Paul writes something similar to friends in Rome. His face is marred by faith's dust, hope's sweat, and love's blood. He is in the arena. His character is being formed by daring greatly for the sake of the gospel.

At the outset, think about the arenas in our lives that have shaped us. Arenas that have formed our character. Perhaps in our memories we enter the arena of our family system. As a son or a daughter. As the oldest, or youngest, or middle, or only child. The expectations placed on our little shoulders, it formed who we are. Then as a parent we swore up and down we wouldn't raise our children the way our parents raised us. But the habits of our family system slipped out—healthy or not. Or maybe we think of being in the arena of faith. God affirming that we are a beloved child at our baptism; and that we are promised to a community who will help form our character in the ways of God's love. Or maybe we think about ourselves as a collective church inside Winston Salem in the arena of 2019. The issues that swarm us and threaten our common humanity. It has shaped our ethos toward being a church who cares about voting rights, racial justice, food disparities, transgender equality. Of course, sometimes we get to choose our arenas, other times we don't. But as we begin, let's think about the arenas that have formed the character of who we are.

When we read St. Paul, we try to untangle the hairball of his thick theology. He is wrestling with what it means to be thrust into the arena of following Jesus Christ. He's explaining how because of what God has done, when we look down at our feet, we find ourselves standing on the ground of God's grace. And how as a result we are to rejoice, first, in sharing the beauty of God's glory with the world. And second, he says we are to rejoice not only in the glory, but also in our sufferings. He weaves the two together as what it means to be standing in the arena of faith. His logic seems a bit backwards, doesn't it? Follow his progression and he says we rejoice in our sufferings too because it leads to endurance, which leads to character building, which leads to hope. Usually we think of it as the other way around: our hope leading to it building

character, which leads to some endurance, which may prepare us to handle suffering when it comes. But here Paul says it flows in the other direction and we are to rejoice because it forms us and births hope.

To be honest, I'm not sure we're there yet. When suffering comes creeping into our lives most of us don't see it as an opportunity for character growth. When suffering comes, most of us do not rejoice. Instead, we pull a Job asking God, "What did I ever do to deserve this?" But St. Paul claims while thrust into the arena of our faith we have moments of sharing God's glory and moments of suffering. Both of which form and inform who we are as people of faith. So, he says we are to rejoice in both.

Well, it sounds trite. But oddly enough we know there's also some truth to what he is saying. We endure the hard times and often when looking back, they are the moments that form us. Dare I say, often they are the moments which draw us closer to God and each other. If you've ever been to a candlelight vigil you may have felt the closeness, the hope permeating the darkness. A few months ago, after the shooting at the Jewish synagogue in Pittsburgh, where eleven beautiful souls died too soon, NPR interviewed one their own correspondents who was also a member of the synagogue. After they held the service, someone asked him how the community was doing. He said, in the darkness of the tragedy the community has been bonded stronger and drawn more closely together. St. Paul is saying that although suffering is never God's desire for us, through the tragedy of the cross, God has used it to draw us closer to God and to each other. It might sound trite, but there is some truth in it: if God can use Jesus' suffering to draw us closer together, then perhaps God can also use our suffering as well.

The French mystic Simone Weil once said that there are two things that pierce the human heart: one is beauty; the other is affliction. Every one of us knows what it is like to encounter the glory of beauty. And every one of us knows what it is like to endure affliction. They are both found in the arena of life and faith. It is also where we find God pouring out love and drawing closer to us. Maybe it is enough to keep us going; maybe it is enough to keep us daring greatly. And maybe, just maybe, there is some peace knowing that God is in the arena with us. At least that is what we gospel people hope...