

So, according to Paul, we're supposed to boast in our sufferings. I think Garrison Keillor can tell us something about that. "Here in the Midwest, we all have long memories of suffering and pain, because, for one thing, winter is so long, and when finally it gets warm and beautiful as it is now, finally (the last ice went out last week) we try to relieve these painful memories of cold, of neglect, of suspicion, darkness, anger, Bologna sandwiches, stupidity, butterscotch pudding (we try to heal ourselves by subjecting ourselves to intensely pleasurable experiences) with mindless pleasure in the sun while wearing as few clothes as possible (sand, air, water, sun, grass, gin) but we were not brought up to experience pleasure. It doesn't register on us. It's like trying to write on glass with a pencil. We get into as few clothes as possible and the sight of ourselves depresses us. Sunlight makes us gloomy. We are not Mediterranean people. We're Lutheran people. Even the Catholics up here are Lutheran. And I don't like to generalize about Lutherans, but one thing that's true of every single last one of them without a single exception is that the low point of their year is their summer vacation."

If we think about boasting in our sufferings, we might think, now why would anyone want to do that? But it does seem, in a way, to be a particularly Midwestern or Lutheran inclination. For many, I think it's about the cultural pressure not to put oneself over others. So rather than talk about how good we are, we get into contests over how bad our lives are. "You have a cold, so sorry to hear that, did I mention I have pneumonia?"

For me, it relates to being a baseball fan. If there's a no-hitter going, you surely don't want to say so, or at least not until the 8th inning at least, because otherwise it'll be your fault when the opposing team gets that first hit up on the board. And we don't want to talk about how good things are, because they might suddenly turn bad and that would be our fault.

But Paul's not talking about one-up-manship suffering or the kind of suffering that comes as some kind of magical jinx.

And I don't think Paul is providing us a formula either, even though his language kind of sounds that way. Suffering leads to endurance which leads to character which leads to hope. As if suffering is sort of mathematically a prerequisite for endurance, character and hope and without suffering, one won't arrive at the end product, the hope. No, Paul's not laying out a prescriptive formula.

What Paul *is* doing is speaking from his own experience. Because he has certainly known his share of suffering. Prison multiple times, scorn, abuse, slander. Living hand to mouth—depending on his modest income from occasional tent making and leaning on the generosity of others.

Paul knows something about suffering, he's experienced it. And what his experience has told him is that even in the midst of his suffering, God is present. God's peace which we have through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And God's love which is poured out in us through the Holy Spirit.

God doesn't give us suffering to test us, or to help us to grow in patience and character so we'll then come to trust and love God.

But as Paul well knows, suffering is a part of our lives. Like it or not, want it or not. On Friday I shared words of blessing and thanksgiving with James Hover, who had just become a dad for the second time. Then just a couple of hours later, I watched as the afternoon preschool class let loose beautiful pink and green balloons into the bluest of blue skies as one of them called out to their missing classmate, “I love you, Carson.”

And on Saturday I presided over my first wedding as Elizabeth and Beau Miller stepped out into what everyone present at that wedding hopes will be a long and blessed marriage, knowing that if it is truly a lasting marriage, one day one of them will mourn the loss of the other..

Kate Braestrup, author of *Marriage and Other Acts of Charity*, relates a conversation she had with a young couple when discussing their upcoming wedding service. Melanie, The bride to be asks carefully, “...you want us to actually say ‘till death do us part?’” And Braestrup responds, “‘Look at it this way,’ I said. ‘Being parted by death is actually your best-case scenario. Being parted by death is what happens if a marriage works.’” Braestrup relates that the couple left her office looking sober, maybe even a little stunned.

Suffering is part of our life. It’s a fruit of being alive.

But those experiences we have in life that bring us suffering are not sent to us by God to somehow make us stronger or wiser or more patient.

Author Ronald Rolheiser tells a story of woman who’d been raised in the church, but whose interest and practice in religion had slipped away. But one day that all changed for her. She had traveled out to Colorado to do some skiing with her sister, arriving on a Saturday evening. The next morning her sister invited her to go to church, but she

politely refused and went skiing instead. On her first run down the ski slope she hit a tree and broke her leg. Sporting a huge cast, she was released from the hospital the following Saturday. The next morning her sister again invited her to church. With nothing better to do she accepted. It was Good Shepherd Sunday and the visiting minister began his sermon this way...

“There is a custom among shepherds in Israel that existed at the time of Jesus and is still practiced today that needs to be understood in order to appreciate this text. Sometimes very early on in the life of a lamb, a shepherd senses that it is going to be a congenital stray, that it will forever be drifting away from the herd. What that shepherd does then is deliberately break its leg so that he has to carry it until its leg is healed. By that time, the lambs become so attached to the shepherd that it never strays again.”

The woman said, “I may be dense, but given my broken leg and all this chance coincidence, hearing this woke something up inside me. Fifteen years have passed since then and I have prayed and gone to church regularly ever since.

Rollheiser makes the point that God does not cause the disasters, accidents and evils that befall us in this world, but that’s not the same as saying God does not speak through them. God speaks through the things that happen in our lives, and speaks in a way that wants to draw us every closer in relationship to him.

God’s presence with us in the midst of that suffering helps us to get through it—to endure it. God’s presence with us in the midst of that suffering calls us through to a newer, stronger, wiser version of the person God has created us to be. And God’s presence in the midst of suffering gives us the hope that Paul speaks of.

And Paul's hope is not about wishful thinking for an uncertain outcome—"maybe it will happen, maybe it won't, but I sure hope it does."

When hope is spoken of in the New Testament, it's instead speaking to a certainty of trust and a sure confidence. Here Paul in 2 Corinthians, "...because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal."

So indeed, we can boast in our suffering, because through God suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us because it points us every more surely to God's promises for us. Promises of which we have a foretaste in this life, but which we will dwell in assuredly in the life to come.

And that certainty is God's gift to us, a gift that often comes to us in the midst of and through the most difficult struggles in our lives. Not that we can always know that or be told that in the midst of whatever struggle we are enduring, to be sure. But it is a certainty that we can see and experience with some distance and perspective from that particular event.

As Paul tells us, through Jesus Christ we have the peace of God—a peace that passes all our understanding. And through the Holy Spirit God's love has been poured out into us. Poured out!

God's peace and God's love are with us and in us always—in days of joy and blessing and in those days of suffering we endure. And through them God brings us the hope that is a certain trust in his promise to us—a promise of relationship forever and ever.