

The Stories of our Lives
Romans 5:1-5
Trinity Sunday, 2016
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Today is Trinity Sunday. The Trinity is our doctrine which helps explain how God relates to us: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Theologians often spill much ink attempting to explain this mystery. However, the best way to understand the Trinity is not to recite complex and difficult theology. Instead the best way to understand the Trinity is to tell the story of how God gives us grace -- God gives us strength -- God changes us and calls us to help others in our world. That is the story of the Trinity. That is the story of our lives. Can we tell those stories? Can we tell the story of how God gives us strength and grace? Will we keep writing chapters in the book of our life?

Our morning reading from Romans can help us think about those questions strength. These few verses ask us to remember and offer us the opportunity to name the places God has changed our lives and our stories. Let's think back over the arc of our lives as we ponder Paul's words. Paul says that 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 about our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast about 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."

As we listen to these words, we not only hear about Paul's struggles - we often call to mind our own lives. When we have known peace with God - could we tell that story? Were times in our lives in which we felt everything around us was falling apart and yet somehow we were able to find a calm center. We were able to live through and with the chaos. When God was the peace that we needed?

What about grace? Grace is sometimes described as unmerited goodness. Have there been times in our lives when we found grace? What happened on the day we discovered forgiveness, acceptance, understanding -- amazing grace - instead of the treatment we most probably deserved?

Incredulously, Paul boasts about suffering! None of us want to suffer - and yet most of us have suffered - and some of us have suffered a great deal. How did we endure it - where was it we found strength? Friends - family - prayer? Did the

presence of God help us to endure what we suffered? What stories can we tell about God's being with us in emotional and physical pain?

And, to continue asking ourselves about Paul's statements, did we - like Paul - come out the other end from pain and loss any better for the experience? Is Paul correct about suffering's strengthening character? Can we tell that story? Sometimes we lose a great deal in our lives and we become bitter - I think of the book of Ruth in the Bible. Naomi lost not only her husband - seven sons in the matter a few years. Naomi had no reason to live - yet grace intervened in her life in the guise of Ruth, her daughter in law, should have found another husband. Yet Ruth insisted on traveling with Naomi and leading her back to joy - Ruth was the grace Naomi needed to endure her suffering. Have we met any a Ruth in our lives? Have we felt the presence of grace through a friend who stuck by us no matter what? Have we had loved ones draw us out of deep depression with their constant care? Can we tell this story?

I've just finished Atul Gawande's book: *Being Mortal Medicine and What Matters in the End*. Gawande, a surgeon, asks the question, what does it take for each of us to have a sense of well-being. What does it take for us to have a good life - - at any age? Those are important questions we have to keep asking ourselves. It was a question Ruth had to ask herself. Gawande writes: "In the end, people don't view their life as merely the average of all its moments . . . For human beings; life is meaningful because it is a story. A story has a sense of a whole, and its arc is determined by the significant moments, the ones where something happens. . . We have purposes larger than ourselves."ⁱ Ruth found purpose through her daughter in law's persistence - Ruth discovered God had **not** abandoned her. If God is present anywhere, it is in those stories.

As we look back over our lives it's good to tell the story of finding strength and grace. It's important to be able to name the times we needed forgiveness - of help enduring our suffering. What about that grace and love led us to choose a different direction in our lives. Would our stories be any different if we had not known the love of Jesus Christ?

As we think about faith and life -- Frederick Buechner reminds us that we would do "well to remember what the ancient creeds of the Christian church declare credence not in theological ideas or religious system. The ancient creeds of the faith about a serious of flesh and blood events that happened, are happening, will happen, in time and space. - it is a story." Buechener continues, "Christian faith *always* has to do with flesh and blood and time and space, more specifically [our] flesh and blood and time and space that day by day all of us are involved with, stub our toes on, flounder around in trying to look as if we have good

sense. The Truth that Christianity claims to be true is ultimately to be found," he states, "not in the Bible, or in the Church, or Theology - the best they can do is point to the Truth - the Truth of Christianity is found in our own stories." He concludes, "It is absolutely crucial, therefore, to keep in constant touch with what is going on in our own life's story and to pay close attention to what is going on in the stories of others' lives. If God is present anywhere, it is in these stories."^[iii]

Understanding the story of faith in our lives is important not only to our physical and emotional health, but also to understanding the larger purpose of our lives. As Dr. Gawande notes - the larger purpose of our lives is what makes our lives worth living. Our faith gives us strength, grace, love, endurance and character - to name just a few attributes. Faith can make us adventurous and bold - it can lead us forward with hope when all seems hopeless. Faith can help us deal with daily life - which the poet Auden noted is "the hardest time of all." Faith connects us to all the stories of scripture: Abraham and Moses, Sarah and Hannah, Peter and Paul, Lydia and Mary. We can find our stories in their stories. We can find their stories in our story - we can understand that we are all called to live this life as fully and as well as we possibly can.

Alleluia! Amen.

ⁱ Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal*