

Week of Trinity Sunday – Year C – June 2, 2010
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Psalm 8; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15
Susan E. Wilmot

There's no other way to say this, we have a very difficult passage of Scripture to look at this evening. One that we probably would all wish to avoid or skip over. Actually that is part of the point, and one of the questions we all need to ask ourselves, and consider as a community of faith. The passage is from Paul's letter to the church in Rome. It is a passage about suffering, Paul's thoughts on the subject, as well as the fruit of his personal experience in this matter.

There are at least two ways to understand this passage. The first level of understanding is what we might call the world of the text – that is reading the text with our eyes and ears open for clues as to the issue Paul may have been addressing in this portion of his letter. Paul lived and wrote in a specific era, and so there were undoubtedly specific issues and historical circumstances that prompted his words of comfort to the Roman church. However, if we believe, as we do, that all Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit, and is useful for teaching – as we read in second Timothy (2 Timothy 3:16), then at another level, this passage still has a powerful message for us today.

Let's look first at the historical context because it is probably linked to a common phenomenon of our modern lives. Paul's world was dominated by Greco-Roman philosophy, thinking, and culture. The predominant cultural influence was what we now call the honor-shame society. Honor was everything, and it was to be gained at all costs. For you and I, we might best get a sense of the honor-shame *system* by comparing it to a modern day lifestyle. Proverbially it is close to our keeping up with the Jones' only we would add on steroids. For example, making sure we invite only the 'right people' to dinner or been visible in our support of the winning horse in a political campaign. Perhaps making sure that we attend fundraisers and giving generously but with the intent of holding the debt for repayment or the return of a favor at a later time, or just simply so we are honored with a plaque or at a presentation of some kind. You know how it works. In Paul's day, honor largely involved the same time of activity: generous gifts with the expectation that everyone knew who the gift giver was, paid the appropriate dues of respect, and held the giver in high regard. It was generosity with perks and kickbacks, plus the absolute expectation that the favor would be returned. All being quite contrary to Jesus' philosophy of not letting your left hand know what your right hand is doing, or giving anonymously for love of God, to the glory of God's name. The whole point of this societal construct was to gain honor, because honor is power.

It is called the honor-shame system, because the other side of honor was to be shamed in some way. The worst part of trying to live into this system was losing status, and therefore losing power in the eyes of your peers. Today, it might be the equivalent of bankruptcy, or failing to pay our bills and becoming homeless. For those in the first century game, shame was to be avoided at all costs. There is some indication that the church in Rome was undergoing the kind of public humiliation that could be construed as a form of shame, dishonor, and a definite loss of fragile status within the community. Then we read Paul's letter. Paul is adamant that suffering is not to be considered a matter of God's displeasure or punishment, and despite what society may say it is not a matter of shame either. Paul argues strongly against the supposition that being a worshipper of Christ was a shameful way to live. Remember that becoming a Christian meant turning one's back on cultic or ritual worship of the many pagan gods of Rome that the general population indulged in largely as a matter of honor. For you and me, it is like paying our taxes because we're good citizens or keeping our bills paid up-to-date so our credit rating isn't trashed. The kind of things we expect everyone to do, because it is our duty and society expects us to conform in this way. Another way to think of it is taking up our share of the load for the greater good. In Paul's day, throwing a little incense or dropping a few coins at the shrine of pagan gods was the equivalent of being an honorable and respectable citizen. Being a faithful Christian

meant that those types of communal activities were considered idolatrous and shameful. It was not easy to go against the grain. Today, our lives are filled with other challenges, often related to the ethics of living to our Christian values. There are tremendous pressures to keep our faith a matter of personal preference. There are enormous temptations to play down our Christian values, or even conveniently forget about them under certain circumstances.

We should also keep in mind that in Paul's day and age, as in Jesus' time, there was still a strong feeling that sickness, ill health, deformity, or any form of bad luck in life was God's curse on a person or family. Even though Jesus has taught that that was a simplistic view of things, not everyone was entirely convinced with the new teaching. The cultural influence was so strong that even Christians who lived under grace still may have felt the burden of shame for something that was essentially out of their control. We have a much more rational approach to being differently abled or to becoming sick these days don't we? The first thing that we feel about such common matters of life is perhaps not shame. However, how exactly do we define our feelings in these circumstances? Are we still a little scared to get too close to our emotions when bad things happen to good people, and especially when it's personal?

Paul explains that we are surrounded by the knowledge and experience of God's moment-by-moment love and care for us, as clear and abiding evidence that God does not desire us to suffer for the sake of suffering. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we are filled with God's grace and peace as signs of our justification, or what we might think of as being in right relationship with God. He is helping us out here by sharing the fruit of his own multiple experiences of trials and suffering. His list of characteristics, which seem to build on one another in a kind of model of growth and development, is not a prescription that we should all take or a way to shame us for having a different response to suffering. His sharing is purely descriptive and personal. It also describes for us something very important about Paul that all Christians share in. Paul has not just endured suffering, gritted his teeth, and lived through it. He has clearly prayed about what his many trials mean as a faithful follower of Christ, and what he might learn about God in and through suffering. In other words, Paul has reflected on his experiences, and found what? He has found hope. And he has discovered that with hope in Christ, there is no shame or disappointment in this life or the next. What can he mean by that?

According to Romans, our hope is not just the result of being optimistic people, or of wishful thinking. Hope is a gift of grace, one that epitomizes our faith and faithfulness because it is the basis of our salvation and our freedom in Christ, our healing and wholeness in God. In our faithfulness, we discover more of God's steadfast faithfulness and love at work amongst us and in our own lives. This gift is available to us and to all in the power and constant presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit. But have we addressed the really deep questions here? In a society that values bodily perfection, beauty and brains, eternal youth, what is the overwhelming feeling if we are not picture perfect, struggle with our weight, or when we get sick? Do we experience denial, guilt, embarrassment, or even just a hint of shame in the challenges of being frail human creatures? Have we been as intentional as Paul has, in reflecting on the meaning of our struggles? Have we really challenged God to reveal to each of us, and to our community of faith what there is to know and learn from our suffering for our spiritual growth, or in order to continue practicing God's graciousness together? The real shame of times of suffering comes in denying our deepest feelings, refusing to reflect in prayer, and failing to grow from what we are being called to learn and accept. The real shame in suffering is a lack of intentionality about seeking God's redeeming love, grace, and purpose. The real joy in any kind of suffering is God's peace, our hope in God, our faith in Christ, and the presence of the Holy Spirit to comfort and guide us into all Truth.

Amen.