

October 11, 2015    “Putting Second First: Spiritual Nourishment”    Romans 5:1-5  
The Rev. Dr. Tom Blair    Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore

*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.*

*Romans 5:1-5*

This is the first of our autumn “Putting Second First” Sermons, about what is offered through God’s gift of this congregation’s talent, commitment and call to be part of the Body of Christ here in Baltimore... and today we begin with Spiritual Nourishment; made available here in many varieties and in ample quantities...

So, here’s a question that you may have asked yourself, given where you find yourself in this particular moment: what is it that draws people to go to church?

Why *do* people go to church? Believe it or not, according to a pile surveys that I’ve reviewed over the years, most people don’t go to church to find out about the Bible, as important as that is. They don’t even go to hear how somebody else is living out their faith, important as that might be. Most people go to church because they have a problem. Fifty percent of all people who show up in any church on any given Sunday are here because there is something wrong in the center of their lives. What are they looking for?

Well, I once worried a lot about these statistics. But to be honest with you, when I realized that if fifty percent of the people who came to church had problems, then fifty percent of the time I preach, I also have a problem.

So we are all here; somehow to connect with God about our problems, and the problems in our city, our country and all over the world, in word, in song, in shared Spirit, in prayer, in fellowship together. We come to connect ourselves with the living answer to our problems, (Jesus) on a short-term or long-term level: me to God, me to me; me to another; me to each other... (that about does all the combinations; right?) – and we have a name for all this

connecting: worship.

I've had my own theory for some time now about our human need for worship; that its something like a cup each of us has to fill, on a regular basis. There are different sizes & shapes of these cups; some people need them filled differently than others; some are filled with long prayers & incense, maybe, others are filled with quiet & stillness. Some just need a thimble full, to top it off, others need to be drenched in a flood of music, love and prayers. Sometimes it depends on where you are in life, down in the dumps, or maybe closer to the mountaintop. Such is the stuff of life for us... and it has always been so.

The Apostle Paul is one of the keenest witnesses to this phenomenon in human history. He not only talked the talk, but he walked the walk- of the ups and down of faith & life. Beginning as a Pharisaic Jew, full of himself as a person can be, then turned upside down after his thoroughly unexpected encounter with the Risen Jesus, (and then full to the top with Jesus' mercy and unrelenting grace), Paul is a human thermostat of measuring the fullness of one's Spiritual life.

Paul's letter to the Romans is at the top of the list of the most influential letters ever written. We don't know terribly much about what the church in Rome was going through at the time of Paul's letter to them. More to the point, Paul himself had at best secondhand knowledge; he was writing to a church he did not establish, to people whom he had never met. But we can assume that they were afflicted with at least an average level of first-century church hardship: persecution, death, economic burdens, temptations to stray from the Way, rivalries and divisions, and the like.

Christians at that time were different from other Roman citizens; they dressed differently, worshiped differently, treated others differently.

They didn't blend into culture all that well, and suffered for it.

Christian persecutions in Rome are very well documented, and were in a word; vicious. And in the midst of it all, Paul writes this:

"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."

Despite the way this verse reads, Paul was not a masochist. His use of the word

‘boasting’- was not addressed to himself, but to God’s power that led him through the trials he had already gone through. (An analogy: it’s more like Paul was rejoicing in having driven through a huge mud puddle in a VW Beetle, and not gotten stuck, rather than boasting about the horsepower of the vehicle that he drove.) It was not his own doing, but God’s work, all the way...

The emotional progression that Paul lays out is striking in it’s positive inclination- ever higher, always up and forward. Human emotional progression is not always as Paul describes: sometimes suffering produces frustration; and frustration produces self-pity, and self-pity produces apathy, and apathy produces hopelessness, because God’s love can simply no longer be found.

I have to wonder what Paul was doing as he wrote these words or narrated them to his scribe. Was he channeling Friedrich Nietzsche, saying in other words: "That which does not kill us makes us stronger.?" I don’t think so...

Certainly Paul knew more firsthand about suffering than the German philosopher, which begins to give him a lot of credibility, but just as much, I think Paul was simply describing the path of life on which we all meet.

We all need spiritual nourishment, or else we’ll shrivel up, and die.

The mid-twentieth century American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, is credited with having written what has become one of the world’s most famous prayers. The beginning of the prayer is the part that is familiar to you: *God give us the grace to accept with serenity the things which cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.* (Sounds familiar, doesn’t it?)

It’s a prayer that is likely more familiar to us than the Apostle Paul’s ‘ladder of faith’, and on the face of it more passive, restrained and reservedly hopeful.

It is less well-known that Niebuhr finished the prayer with the following, more powerful and far less-repeated lines:

*Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as the pathway to peace; taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His will. That I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with Him forever in the next.<sup>1</sup>*

By ending with only the first sentence, serenity or peace could be understood as a sort of faded affirmation of the power of positive thinking. The second part of the prayer helps us to see that the One who brings peace in life is God, through Jesus.

So, the bottom line of all of this is that we receive Spiritual Nourishment through God in Jesus Christ. (That's straightforward enough, isn't it?) And the best place to find the words, the Spirit, the presence of Jesus, is as part of His Body on Earth, which is the church.

Why do people go to church? Because, one way or another, we receive Spiritual Nourishment here.

And by Spiritual Nourishment, I don't necessarily mean that what we get when we come to church are Spiritual Vitamins to keep us healthy, or a vaccination from all the ways life can treat us badly. Life just doesn't work that way.

I have a friend in my Clergy sermon writing group who said that she once used to treat life as an exam, a test you had to pass. You know the sort of thing: work hard, worry, try to guess what the examiner wants. Do your best, worry some more; get up and do it all over again. You know how it goes. How hard is that?

Well, Life is not like that. God is not like that either. Just being, just being human, whatever it means, is testing enough.

The bottom line of Christian Spiritual Nourishment is the sheer gift of grace, the way in which it arrives totally unannounced and clearly undeserved on our part.

God loves you; who you are, how you are made up, all the parts of you (even those parts of you that you might not like so much yourself.)

Moreover, God returns your unfaithfulness with mercy and forgiveness...

God returns your apathy with a reason for caring.

God returns your doubt with opportunities for belief.

God returns your disbelief with occasions for service.

God will give us in life more than enough opportunities to forgive, serve and care, and in those very occasions, we will find the spiritual nourishment we need to continue our journey; in Jesus' name. Amen.