

A Field in Iowa

Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-33

June 16, 2019

Brian Russo

“We boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us (Romans 5:3-5).”

That there is some wisdom, folks. Worthy of journaling down, or tattooing on your arm, or keeping on a post-it note on your fridge, or front door, or computer screen to see and remember before you start the day.

But, I also sometimes wonder, if I’m honest... is this the kind of wisdom we should celebrate, highlight, or parrot when sharing the good news of this faith with others? I’m not sure “boasting about sufferings” plays well in the hospital ward, schools, or anywhere really in 2019 where inward and outward suffering seems all too prevalent. I knew of a colleague in Seminary who once tried to force the issue however when he was a chaplain in the Princeton University Healthcare System. He told a mother who just received a terminal diagnosis that her sufferings would be for gain and God’s ultimate glory. He was promptly told to get the bleep out of the room.

About three years ago our last remaining Circle was sitting in the reception room doing a Bible Study on just this passage. And as I sat in, I listened to Betsy and Sally, Nancy and Antonia, Taylor, Jean and Dolores all struggle with and criticize Paul’s point of emphasis on suffering for gain. In the end, I affirmed their struggle, saying that it would indeed be monstrous for God to want any of us to suffer. And yet, we suffer nonetheless. Why? For hope? For change? Hope alone can’t change everything, and even the most hopeful amongst us are sometimes run over by society or blown away by Mother Nature before we even have the chance to change. ... Admittedly, that last bit wasn’t very helpful and I was probably in a mood, and yes, we ministers go through those too.

About three days ago, I met with three of my original Junior High Schoolers at Cake in Chestnut Hill for brunch. (I seriously have the best job!) All in their twenties now and matured by life we had an earnest conversation about regrets and accomplishments, hardships and victories, hopes and fears. In truth, we talked enough to produce a short educational series, and if everything falls into place, we just might do that! Creating a conduit, a podcast of sorts for teens to dialog with each other, so as to ask questions and gain insight into what they can expect of, and look for, in these most anxious years of their development... Anyway, all three of these beautiful people have been, at one time or several, assaulted by the circumstances of life. The medical, the mental, emotional and interpersonal. Each have, or are going through, their own bit of suffering, and yet, all of them affirmed without question that the valleys of their life, were, in some way, important to walk through so to generate who they are today and who they are hopeful to become tomorrow.

As a result, we concluded that both views on tribulation hold merit. That first and foremost, no matter which way you cut it, suffering sucks. It just sucks. It is so often arbitrary and unfair, that to boast of it would be irrational and even somewhat sinful, as it would diminish the harsher realities others face. But secondly, for those who are fortunate enough to speak from the side of restoration, it’s by first getting lost in those labyrinths of pain that you can ultimately emerge stronger in the end. So... maybe the best approach is not to celebrate it like some strange masochist, encouraging others to despair, but to champion the wisdom that, at least in non-terminal and outright terrible situations, one’s suffering can* lead to endurance, and that endurance to character, and that character to hope.

Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. Your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you (John 16:20-22).”

My friends, this is the very essence of faith. The beauty of it. And it is the medicine for our malady. Before the supernatural, before the mystical, this faith deals with the real, with the deep and the substantive. It does not gloss over or varnish this life. It deals head-on with tragedy and loss and never does it sugar coat it. But, it also doesn’t

stop there. Rather, it sings to what can come next. For it reevaluates, reconstitutes, and redeems all that we perceive and experience and in the end it inspires. Inspire, at its root, means to breathe in the Spirit of God, and that Spirit, high above all others, dilutes the world's sadness with the strongest shot of heavenly hope. It gives us another choice. Another chance. Another life.

A couple weeks ago, the staff received an email from Martha Agate about her mom, Barbara Sheble. She said they were moving Barbara to the third floor in Mather House at The Hill at Whitemarsh, and she would begin Hospice. I went for a visit soon thereafter and another short after that. On that second visit, I was alone with Barbara. And in that room, to an outsider, one might have perceived... *oh yes, a minister and his prayers to a lady with her eyes closed. How sad.* But in that room, I wasn't sad. For Barbara and I were at peace because she was at peace. We listened to some music. I held her hand and told her about Seth. And then I read to her. Not from the Bible, but from a book on her shelf called, "Devoted: 38 Extraordinary Tales of Love, Loyalty, and Life with Dogs."

I asked Barbara, *Barbara, are you a dog-lover?* She emphatically replied, *oh yes!* I picked up the book, flipped some pages, and saw a picture I instantly recognized. I then began reading aloud about "Schoep;" with the subtitle: "Understanding What It Means To Heal."

"John Unger and his then fiancée, spent 18 months canvassing Wisconsin shelters looking for the perfect dog," it begins. They then laid eyes on Schoep, named after a famous state ice-cream. They instantly fell in love and adopted him. Now, Schoep was raised in the wild, and probably, for some nefarious reason, was deathly afraid of men. John, recognizing this, kept his distance at first, and slept on the floor with Schoep at the other end of the room, just so they could get used to each other. It worked. For years they enjoyed that special relationship that probably only dog owners can fully understand. Well, some years later, quite sadly, John and his fiancée split, and John's life began to spiral downward. Downward so far that one night he went to a lake to kill himself. (Here, I thought maybe I should stop reading this to Barbara, but, something, maybe the Spirit, encouraged me on).

For some reason, unknown to John, he also took his dog with him that night. And as he got deep into the water, about to go under, there Schoep stood at the bank and looked at him "with a look never seen before or since." That look inspired something within, and John charged out of the water, weeping, apologizing to Schoep repeatedly while holding him tight. Flash forward some years, and we're at the moment of that iconic photo (embedded at the end of this sermon). Schoep, now old, with failing vision and arthritis in his joints, lies on John's chest and there, in that same water that almost drowned his owner, all of Schoep's aches are soothed away. They stay there for hours, each and every day, and John would do it onward and forever if he could. "Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope..."

John responded to the photo, which since went viral, saying, "I think in today's world we are faced with such heaviness and sadness, we are moving too fast, and people look at this photo and say, "That's the way the world should be, filled with pause, compassion, love, and hope. People are just longing for it. And that's the way I feel about Schoep. We understand each other, we are compassionate towards each other, and we love each other. He is my world." He is my world.

Almost a month ago, my wife and I made the hard decision to put down our dog, Vincent. He was there at the beginning of our relationship, and through every change of our life together. He was my world. Never having a true yard, I would walk Vincent four times a day. I miss those walks terribly. A little over a year ago, Vincent began having seizures. Full body, 5-minute seizures. Blood and crap, the whole thing. Crashing into furniture, hurting himself, terrorizing our son into visible nightmares. The seizures intensified in magnitude and frequency. And you could never predict when they would happen, except sometime in the middle of night. It made going to bed peacefully virtually impossible. He then stopped going down the stairs on his own, and so for a couple months near the end, I slept on a recliner with him under my feet. For the last two weeks of his life, I took off work and drove him around to all of our favorite spots. To all of our parks. To my dad's. To the beach. To where I grew up. We spent almost every minute together. And it was nearly perfect. In red, blue, green.

Then on May 17, he died in my arms, there on the floor of the vet's office. Sadly, I can still see him that way, that last image, on the floor when I closed the door behind me. But, you know, I wouldn't have done it any other way. It sucked, but it was also right. For his death reminded me to truly number my days, as the old Psalmist writes, so to count each that I live, with my family and others, as a gift and blessing. To try new things. To be more adventurous. To live more than fear. And all that, I think, is a byproduct of endurance.

Later that night, and with a map my son was using to learn geography in preschool, I pointed to Iowa and said, *Seth...do you remember how I told you about Iowa (we had been prepping him for this day)? Well, you see there, in Iowa (a place I have never been), there are these incredible fields. Fields that are so large that they are filled with trees, and birdies, and doggies and kitties and Frisbees and water bowls, you can't even begin to count them. And remember how doggy really wanted to go there? Well, I took him there today.* Seth, somewhat confused at first, took a moment or two to himself, but then said, *Daddy... a field in Iowa. Doggy likes it there.*

Lord, I pray he likes it there. There in that field that we conjured out of air, our son has hope that Vincent is running in the sun and the grass with his furry friends. There in that field, our dog's suffering is over, and my nighttime anxieties are cured by relief. There in that field, there are no more stairs and no more seizures. But just a hope and a dreamscape. A place I can imagine him still. A narrative my son could put his faith in.

A field in Iowa. Heaven, and our hope for a New Earth to come. These are not just pretty fables to our unanswerable hardship as mere mortals. These are not fictions rooted out of nothing or pure imagination. No, they are rooted in the hope given to us by the Trinitarian God, who once descended into our flesh so to know and redeem our pain. A God who abides with us still through the Spirit such that we are never truly alone, no matter how often we might be convinced that we are.

Yes, in truth, God's very own Word suggests that there will be isolation. That there will be suffering. That there will be sadness, disease, and dying. But, that is not the end of the story nor the promise of the gospel. For as John writes, our pain will turn into joy, for life has indeed conquered death!

And so we are then given a choice. Do we become children of darkness? Children of despair? Or do we become children of light and ambassadors of hope?

My friends, do not boast in yours or the world's suffering, but see them (where possible), as an opportunity to affect change. To grow in endurance. To mature in character and wisdom. And to live into hope for something else, for something more. For something embodied in love.

Take courage, my friends.

Amen.

