



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Hope Does Not Disappoint”

Romans 5:1-8

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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. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.

Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.

Four years ago, almost to the day, was my first Sunday as the Associate Pastor for Youth and Young Adults at Second Presbyterian Church. For those of you who don’t remember, I wasn’t in worship on my first Sunday. While you all were here singing hymns in this gorgeous, air conditioned sanctuary, I was sitting in the hot sun on the tailgate of a broken down mini-van in the parking lot of a funeral home surrounded by a group of disappointed teenagers who were stuck in the middle of nowhere on the way to our mission trip in Philadelphia. It wasn’t a particularly auspicious beginning, but by the end of that trip, I had observed enough of the youth and leaders



of Second Pres to feel confident in my hopes of being welcomed and trusted, my hopes of serving and learning and leading alongside this community. It seemed like my hopes were justified.

And they have been. These past four years have been the best of my life. I have lived into God's calling and been so well loved and experienced such deep joy here as part of this church family. As this last year began it felt like the Spirit was moving and so many of my hopes were being realized, I was right there with Paul, feeling all this peace, boasting in God's glory. And then came spring 2020.

Let's be honest, 2020 has been a rough year for hope. Just talk to all the seniors in high school, anybody who was supposed to get married this spring, talk to business owners or healthcare workers, talk to all the people who used to have jobs. Talk to communities that have been reeling from injustice for years, for centuries. Talk to people who really believe, who really hope, that justice is necessary and achievable. Have you ever been disappointed? Yeah, all the time.

This past week, we pastors were jokingly referring to our present time as the apocalypse. Honestly I don't know why it took us so long to start making jokes about the end times, because the last few months have just been like one chapter of Revelation after another, but I think at least I finally cracked because this year has been wearing us down. I imagine many of you can relate. I think collectively we feel the compounded weight of the chaos, and the anxiety that living through a global pandemic has brought to so many. I think collectively we feel the weight of racial injustices that our country can't seem to overcome, the weight of responsibility to take action and the weight of the fear that any action we take will be inadequate. At first, it's sort of energizing to respond to crisis and speak out for justice. And after a while, it wears you down.

And this is why I'm so curious to try to figure out what on earth Paul is talking about when in this passage he begins with suffering and ends not with exhaustion, but with hope. At first Paul says we can boast in our hope of sharing in the glory of God, and that makes sense to me. I have this idea, this hope, that one day or even starting right now, already, the sacrificial death and triumphant resurrection of Jesus Christ will bring the Kingdom of Heaven crashing down all over the place, and that idea is fun to hope in. I'm happy to boast, to announce with enthusiasm that God has come to make a home on this earth and there is space for everyone. That's easy.

But Paul says, not only that, we also boast in our sufferings.

Before things get better, while things are still hard, we are called to live with the same confidence, the same enthusiasm for the Gospel, the same willingness to boast in the love of God as we assume we'll have one day when our hopes are fulfilled and God's kingdom is evident in every corner of the earth.

Paul's argument is that responding to suffering with trust in God builds endurance, makes us stubbornly patient, and endurance over time forms us into people whose character is aligned with God's character, and that's how you grow hope. And finding hope, even in suffering, is good because hope does not disappoint us.



Which is where I run into a problem with Paul's logic. Because from one perspective, hope and disappointment actually go hand in hand. You can't be disappointed if you don't start out with hope in the first place. "Don't get your hopes up," they say. You *could* argue that the more hope you live with, the more likely you are to also live with constant disappointment.

This past Wednesday, George sat down with Dr. Bill Lee, the retired pastor of Loudon Avenue Christian Church, for a conversation about racism in America. I watched their conversation on our livestream, and you can go back and watch it, too, if you haven't had the chance. Mostly, George asked questions and listened to Bill, his friend. What stood out most to me about what Dr. Lee was articulating for the church was his ability to hold onto real disappointment and real hope at the same time. He didn't mince words when expressing his pain and even anger about the systems and individuals that have perpetuated racism in the United States. And I wouldn't blame him if he'd stopped there. But I think Dr. Lee has seen enough lives undeniably transformed by the love of God that he's not going to give up hope in the church so easily. He offered a sort of challenge, a call to action. He was talking about God's call to love our neighbors, and he said, "If we who claim faith would simply do what we're supposed to do, we could radically change this world." I know that's a lot easier said than done, but what a gracious and hopeful response. Dr. Lee doesn't owe that to anybody. I don't think he said that because he wanted to make us feel better. I think he said that because he believes in the power of the love of God. Like Paul believed in the power of the love of God. Paul says hope does not disappoint us *because* God's love has been poured into our hearts.

Not because everything goes our way. Not because we can always see evidence in the world around us of all the things we hope for. Not because Christians don't experience disappointment.

But because the love of God is power. And we have seen it face to face. And because we have seen it, we can't give up. We are stubbornly patient. We point to God in all circumstances. We have a lot of work to do, but while we work, we hold onto hope as if our lives depended on it—and that is never the wrong choice.

Because our human story begins and ends with love. We might be in the messed up, confusing middle, but that's not what we were made for, and that's not how our story ends.

When we proclaim hope, here in the messed up middle, we make a witness to our foundational belief that regardless of any disappointing circumstances we may experience, the power of God's love is greater than any other.

Now I do worry sometimes that if all we proclaim is hope, we'll forget to be honest about the reality of disappointment. We'll forget to be honest about the things in the world that have disappointed us. And more than that I worry that we'll forget to be honest about the disappointments we've caused, the wounds we've inflicted or been complicit in. We'll forget that we're called to respond with repentance and action.



I don't want us be afraid to face the reality of disappointment, in the world around us, but mostly within ourselves, the places where we individually or collectively fall short. I don't want to be afraid to admit that I've done wrong.

And I don't think I have to be afraid.

Because Jesus knew those things about me. Jesus knew how deeply inadequate my half-hearted attempts at righteousness were going to be. He saw me just as I am, not all that good, certainly far from perfect, and still his love covered me. Still his choice was sacrifice, on my behalf, so that I could have access, so that everyone could have access to the grace in which we all stand. This grace which is abundant, expansive, this grace which gets to work on even the hardest hearts. In every circumstance, we are covered by the love of God. What more could we hope for than that?

One evening last summer at Montreat Youth Conference, our group was reflecting on what we'd learned together, and one of the seniors looked at me and said, "You know Rachel, if I've learned anything from you these last few years, it's that God loves me and I didn't have to do anything to earn it."

That's the beginning of everything. To know that God's love for you is real, to know that God's love for you is an extravagant blessing, a gift that could never be earned. That's what gives you power. The power to take risks because you know that the love of God surrounds you. The power to make room for others, because you know that the love of God is wide. The power to make sacrifices on behalf of people you'll never even meet because you know that the love of God is for all people. While we were still sinners Christ died for us—that's the kind of love God has for us, that's the kind of love that has been poured into our hearts so that we might share it with others. And doesn't that give you hope?

This is my last opportunity to preach from this pulpit, and I want to use it to say this:

I hope. So many things.

But most of all I hope that you will feel God's love for you, God's extravagant, unearned, simply-because-you-are-you kind of love. And when you feel that love I hope you will feel its power. I hope you know that there is nothing in life or in death that can stop it. I hope the love of God makes you stubbornly patient. I hope the love of God continues to form you into a community of character, a community who acknowledges disappointment even when you're at fault. With everything you do, with every decision that you make, with everything you have: lean into the hope that the love of God could and does and will radically change this world.

I have so much hope, and hope does not disappoint.

Amen.

