

A Pastoral Letter to the Saints of St. John, Bingen on the Third Sunday in Lent, 2020

Dear friends in Christ,

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The apostle's words to the Romans heard on this third Sunday in Lent in the Lord's church around the world are these:

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:1-8)

“We rejoice in our sufferings.” We do not panic in our sufferings. We do not despair in our sufferings. We do not become angry or resentful or judgmental or self-righteous or despondent or selfish in our sufferings. No, dear friends, we who are created by God, who are provided for by God, who are defended against all danger, who are guarded and protected from all evil by God, we rejoice in our sufferings. How strange these words must sound in times like these. How necessary these words are in times just like these. We rejoice in our sufferings.

We rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces endurance. Endurance means that while we do not recklessly or irresponsibly pursue or invite suffering, sickness, or sadness, neither do we avoid it at all costs. Instead, endurance perseveres precisely in the midst of sufferings such as “weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities” (2 Corinthians 12:10) without giving way, giving up, or giving in. Endurance means receiving and rejoicing in the mind and heart of Christ in Gethsemane just before His own suffering and death. There He prayed to His Father who loves Him, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done” (Luke 22:42). Not long before that, Jesus described the signs and sufferings that will come in these grey and latter days. “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences...but not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives” (Luke 21:10-11, 18-19). To be sure, through times of temptation, trial, and tribulation the Lord calls us to repentance, reminding that all He does for us He does purely out of His fatherly divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in us. So now as always we confess our sins and rejoice to receive the Lord's forgiveness bestowed through Word and Sacrament. We rejoice in God's Word that His means of grace are the medicine of immortality by which full and final Health is given through the forgiveness of sins. We rejoice to receive the one thing needful here in God's holy house and wherever it is brought by God's called and ordained servants. Yes, we rejoice that endurance in this time no less than others means living the lives God has given us according to His wise, gracious, and merciful commands.

In love the Lord commands us to honor our father and mother. Baptized in Christ Jesus, we are given His righteousness that fears and loves God so that we do not despise or anger our parents and other authorities, including the governing authorities of our land instituted by God for our good to serve His creation. (Romans 13:1-7) Rather, we honor them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them. We also give them our prayers and our patience as they seek to serve those for whom their public office was instituted. To be sure, there are times when we may lament and disagree with the politics and political agendas of our leaders, whether real or imagined, along with those whose vocation includes informing the public of news and events, whether objectively or with unnecessary hype and hysteria. While we certainly aim to avoid participating in or adding to the nonsense, such shortcomings give us no cause to disobey or ignore them insofar as we are not mandated to transgress God's holy and loving law. Last Wednesday, a Wyneken kindergartner approached me after chapel and asked, “If pastors are sinners, how can they talk about Jesus?” I responded, in part, “If sinners couldn't talk about Jesus, then Jesus would never be heard.” The same applies, I think, to perfection and politics. Thus, insofar as the recommendations and mandates given by the government and health professionals, particularly regarding precautions intended to slow the spread of infection, do not violate God's Word or encroach upon our conscience, we are given to heed them with patient endurance. We therefore rejoice in our sufferings knowing that suffering produces endurance, and “by your endurance you will gain your lives” (Luke 21:19).

We rejoice in our sufferings because endurance produces character, the successful surviving of a trial or tribulation as God's redeemed children whose lives reflect the love the Lord has given to us. “We love because God first loved us” (1 John 4:19). We love, because that is who we are baptismally created to be in Christ. We love, because that is what we are baptismally created to do in Christ. (Ephesians 2:4-10). We love by neither hurting nor harming our neighbor in his body, but by helping and supporting him in every physical need. Thus the apostle exhorts: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the

interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4). This loving look toward the needs of our neighbors includes using, and sometimes curbing, our Christian and even civil freedom not “as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love to serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Galatians 5:13-14).

Such love, the love of God for us incarnate in our lives, does not consume or hoard more resources than we need for the support and needs of our body. Instead, such love desires and works toward seeing the needs of the neighbor met and strives to provide what they lack. This love through the ages has inspired God’s people to give to the poor, feed the hungry, care for the sick, bind up the injured, visit the lonely, comfort the distressed, and welcome the unwanted. By God’s grace, the church clings to the promise of Psalm 41: “Blessed is the one who considers the poor! In the day of trouble, the Lord delivers him; the Lord protects him and keeps him alive; he is called blessed in the land; you do not give him up to the will of his enemies. The Lord sustains him on his sickbed; in his illness you restore him to full health.” So by God’s grace, the church does charity better than anyone else in the world. “Charity,” G.K. Chesterton writes, “is the power of defending that which we know to be indefensible. Hope is the power of being cheerful in circumstances which we know to be desperate. It is true that there is a state of hope which belongs to bright prospects and the morning; but that is not the virtue of hope. The virtue of hope exists only in earthquake and eclipse. It is true that there is a thing crudely called charity, which means charity to the deserving poor; but charity to the deserving is not charity at all, but justice. It is the undeserving who require it, and the ideal either does not exist at all, or exists wholly for them. For practical purposes it is at the hopeless moment that we require the hopeful man, and the virtue either does not exist at all, or begins to exist at that moment. Exactly at the instant when hope ceases to be reasonable it begins to be useful.” The church understands this, for “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

And that is why “we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Romans 5:3-5). “This I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ‘The Lord is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him’” (Lamentations 3:21-24). “For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:24-28).

What that patient, hopeful waiting looks like will vary from person to person and church to church. When the Black Death (bubonic plague) hit Wittenberg in 1527, Luther and Bugenhagen chose to stay to minister to the sick, the dead, and the distressed. In an open letter penned in the midst of that pestilence, however, Luther wrote that not everyone should do the same. Circumstance and vocation dictate the Christian’s decision, and Luther urges those who are attacked by “sword, famine, wild beasts, or pestilence” (Ezekiel 14:21) neither to forsake their vocation to serve the neighbor nor to tempt God through over-bold recklessness that scorns proper precaution. Likewise, according to our vocations, customs, and faithful efforts to care for one another, different Christians and congregations will make different decisions and take different precautions. Now as always, the body of Christ is called to patient love and understanding as we aim not to be right but to be faithful. “Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother... So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” (Romans 14:13, 19) as together we rejoice in our sufferings.

We rejoice in our sufferings because we hope in a Lord who suffered for us. We rejoice in our sufferings because we hope in a Lord whom death could not hold. We rejoice in our sufferings because that same Lord promises never to leave or forsake us, but to be with us always in Word and Sacrament, forgiving our sins, and granting to us life and salvation. Indeed, we rejoice in our sufferings knowing that they “are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18). So we will continue to receive the Lord’s Divine Service to us, confessing our sins and receiving His forgiveness. We will continue to hope in him. We will continue to love our neighbor. And we will continue to rejoice, through times of suffering, in the words of Luther’s famous hymn, written around the time the plague struck his town: “A mighty fortress is our God, a trusty shield and weapon; He helps us free from every need that hath us now o’ertaken... With might of ours can naught be done, soon were our loss effected; but for us fights the valiant One, whom God Himself elected. Ask ye, who is this? Jesus Christ it is, of Sabaoth Lord, and there’s none other God; He holds the field forever... And take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife, though these all be gone, our victory has been won; the kingdom ours remaineth” (LSB 656).

In Christ,
Pastor Brock