

Character Produces Hope

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
June 15, 2025 – A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
Fathers Day Sunday
Text: Romans 5:1-5

Happy Fathers Day! Spell-check and Microsoft Co-Pilot hate it that I refuse to add an apostrophe in this phrase when I write it out. I do it deliberately because I think the lack of apostrophe makes this a more nuanced and inclusive term. This is important because I think it makes clear that all men can function as fathers whether they are biological fathers or not. For example, you can be an incredible uncle, a life-changing mentor or teacher or coach, a father-like figure to someone without that biological title being a part of the reality of those relationships. This is important to remember, and celebrate on this day when fathers and their role in our lives is front and center. Of course, the shadow side to this whole Fathers Day thing is the sad truth that not all biological fathers are worth celebrating. Some are mean and abusive, or distant and uncaring, or worse. The thing is, though, the father-like potential in every man is what I want us to consider this morning. The Apostle Paul gives us a uniquely helpful way of doing this in today's text from his letter to the church in Rome.

He begins here as Paul usually does, with some theological mumbo-jumbo that made sense to him but is often clear as mud to the rest of us. He's actually continuing an argument he began in the preceding section of the letter. He's explaining that our faith in Jesus Christ as the one who gives us this entirely new relationship with God because of his death and resurrection makes it possible for us to be at peace with God. This is because we have been freed through Jesus from rigid adherence to a legalistic practice of faith. We are at peace with God because we are not constantly coming up short in our striving to follow all the rules. This is because of the "grace in which we stand" which Paul describes. This grace is our once and for all reconciliation with God through Jesus. Grace cannot be earned

through either good works or right belief since it is given to us by means of God's unconditional love for each of us. No matter what we have done or left undone, we are already forgiven because of this unconditional love, because of this grace. Also, because of this grace, we can boast of our hope in God's future for us, here in this world and the life to come.

Now we come to the best part of this little paragraph Paul wrote 2000 years ago. It's a fabulous run-on sentence! "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." Paul has essentially drawn us a verbal road map here that tracks our progress through life from suffering to hope. Note that Paul does not deny the reality of suffering. Just the opposite. He is acknowledging that suffering is real, is part of everyone's life and is something we can't escape, even with the solace we find in our faith. Then he reframes this inevitable suffering – physical, mental, spiritual – as the beginning steps of a journey each of us takes whether we want to or not. Suffering is unavoidable, but it does not have to lead to despair. No, Paul argues that we can regard suffering as a doorway to something much better. How? By recognizing that suffering by its very nature produces endurance, that ability to continue on even though we are suffering. Think of it as the pain of recovering from an injury that requires physical therapy. Anyone who has had PT knows that pain is part of the process. Not agonizing pain – that's always a warning bell! No, PT pain comes from forcing those recovering muscles, ligaments and tendons to move when they really don't want to. That is discomfort pain, that must be suffered *through*. That suffering through is endurance. It is suffering transformed by overcoming it, whatever it takes to do it.

This endurance we have built up within ourselves then strengthens us in our core – literally! Our physical endurance builds up and allows us to make progress in our recovering. The act of enduring something that requires us to experience pain of any sort in

our recovery – well, Paul tells us that produces character. What is character? That is an interesting and some might say an old fashioned notion of the inner strength one builds up that enables us to stay the course even when times get tough. For example, my mom used to tell me that practicing the piano for 30 minutes every day even though I hated it was important to do because it “built character.” In other words, character is that internal strength we draw upon when life does not go the way we want it to. We don’t surrender to the anger or the disappointment or the pain. Instead, these difficult and even scary situations create within us an internal strength to handle things we never thought we could. The journey through suffering by means of endurance creates within us, without our even knowing it, this internal strength, this emotional muscle memory, that enables us to keep moving forward, in spite of all those times it would be so much easier to stop. And so many people do stop. They get stuck in their own pain and misery and just stay there. They never build up that character because they refuse to endure the suffering required. It’s just so much easier to give in. So, they do.

That is just so sad because this character that we build up inside of ourselves gives us this most amazing reward – hope! Hope is the gift that refuses to surrender to suffering and pain. Hope is the gateway into the future we all dream of but hope does not come to us already made from whole cloth. No, it doesn’t work that way. This is what Paul is trying to explain to us here. Hope doesn’t just happen. Each of us has to make it happen for ourselves. We have to endure the suffering life brings our way. As we do, we build emotional, spiritual and even physical strength so that our endurance matures more and more. This internal strength then reveals itself as character which is able to recognize that suffering is not the end because hope is always there. Hope is always possible when we are willing to put in the effort to find it, to create it within ourselves. Then and only then, can we fully receive into our beings the totality of God’s love for us. Hope,

then, is the foundation upon which we build our lives immersed in God's love. How incredible is that!

So, why, of all the passages I could have chosen to preach on this Fathers Day Sunday did I choose this one? That's easy. My father was a big believer in character. Actually, one could argue that my dad was the living embodiment of this little paragraph of Paul's. He endured great suffering when he was a child. But he endured it. With help, he was able to use this endurance to build an entirely new way for living his life – one that this character producing endurance of suffering made possible. And my dad truly was a hopeful and loving person, in a way so gruff and guarded that many folks never knew this side of him. But I did. And I was profoundly influenced by him and his incredible strength of character on full display every day. Let me explain. My dad would never, *ever* park some place clearly marked as “no parking.” This routinely infuriated my mother who, on the rare occasion that they were out running errands together, would ask him to just pull up to the curb so she could run into the grocery store to pick something up. No need to park, she'd say to him, because she'd be right out. He would then proceed to explain to her, with me sitting in the back seat hanging on every word, that he couldn't do that. He couldn't do that because, as he told her, the sign didn't say “No parking unless you are Ruth Shilling and you'll be right back. It says NO PARKING.” And then he would park and she would grumble all the way into the store.

Then there was the time when I was a teenager and he came home from a business trip quite rattled and told us about a very upsetting experience he had with one of his customers. My dad was a metallurgical engineer with US Steel Corporation and his job was to help his customers figure out how best to use the steel and/or tin plate they had ordered when it didn't work as they initially expected. In this capacity he worked on a lot of very interesting and cutting edge projects, like the first no-scratch pans coated with Teflon, like helping to design the first Slinky and the Easy-Bake Oven. He was also on the design team that produced the first ring top soda cans. So, working

with trade secrets of his many prominent customers was a big part of his job of which he was very proud until the day when one customer asked him for the trade secret of another customer. He came home sick to his stomach because he knew he couldn't, he wouldn't do it. And more than that, he knew he had to report this to his bosses which he did. As a result the customer who asked him to get the trade secret was dropped by US Steel. I remember this conversation with my dad vividly. He agonized over what he knew he had to do because it was the right thing to do. His character would not let him do anything else. Right was right. No waffling. No trying to talk himself into thinking it was no big deal. Right was right and that was it. Not an easy road to negotiate especially in the business world, never mind the steel industry.

My dad then retired from the steel business early, about eight years or so after this happened. He said it was so he could stop traveling and work fulltime with my mom in her antique business. I do think that was definitely part of it. But he also told me he saw changes coming in the steel business and in the corporate world that he didn't like, that he wanted no part of. Now, 50 years later, I realize just how wise he was. Could my dad have suffered through, endured the changes he knew were coming? Probably. But he didn't want to, he didn't choose to, because he didn't like the direction things were moving in. His character gave him the strength to do the right thing when circumstances required it. It was not easy and he surely paid a price for it in how his pension was impacted by the early retirement. But he did it anyway, eyes and heart wide open.

This sense of having character, a solid moral core that informed every aspect of his life is what I most admire about my dad. It is the greatest gift he gave me through his witness and his actions. If something was wrong, it was wrong. There was, and is, no justifying it. There is no blaming someone else because your life is not what you imagined it would be. And my dad also taught me something even more invaluable, even more important to the person I am today. Hope

is on the horizon calling us forward and love knows no bounds. My dad taught me to be true to my word, to keep promises made, and to be able to identify the right thing to do in a situation precisely so that I could do the right thing when called upon, without hesitation or second guessing myself. He taught me to speak out when circumstances require it, without counting the cost and to remember it was always possible to speak this truth in kindness. In doing this he also taught me by powerful example his own version of trusting that with God all things are possible. I still miss him every day.

In closing, in the spirit of my dad, I feel called to speak to the heartache I feel in the aftermath of yesterday's tragic shootings of two elected Democratic leaders in Minneapolis. My dad and I know Peter's dad, a much decorated WWII veteran, would not understand the divisive turmoil our country is currently suffering. They would both be angry, confused and heartbroken over all that has transpired in just the last 48 hours. And so many of us feel the same way as evidenced by the huge outpouring of folks rallying in the streets across the country. Now this would thrill both of them! Once again Paul's words we read this morning remind us of how we as followers of Jesus are called to respond when something just isn't right: "We boast in our suffering knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint." Dear ones, hope does not disappoint when it is grounded in God's love for each one of us. May we find hope in this moment able to lead us all forward together, despite all the reasons each side can find to stay stuck in their own suffering. May we find within ourselves the strength of character to create the new beginnings we long for, remembering that truly with God all things are possible. Amen.