

Lent IIIA

March 15, 2020

Romans 5:1-11

Good morning All Saints--all saints present and absent, all saints known and unknown, all saints who have gathered to bring you worship this morning, and all saints connected to us and to one another by the miraculous gift of the internet. Good morning.

This week has been one of the longest, strangest weeks in my life, and probably in yours as well. A week that began with wondering--well, should we maybe stop shaking hands at the peace, has ended with social distancing and self-quarantine. It has ended with us here, a few of us, bringing you streaming worship on Facebook Live.

MSU is emptying out, shifting to online instruction—I know that is stressing out those of you who are faculty members and students. The schools are closed—and I know that is stressing out families, especially when parents still have to work, either in their offices, or from home. The medically fragile are already self-quarantining and locking themselves up in their homes. The libraries are closed, the shelves are barren of toilet paper at Meijer, and we are all trying to keep six feet of distance between us and other people.

And there are NO SPORTS. NONE. Not major league anything, not college anything, not high school anything. NONE. In the past, I have cynically thought that the world's true religion was worshipping the gods of sport, celebrating the holy feasts of the Super Bowl and March Madness. It wasn't until Wednesday that I really took the coronavirus seriously--when the NBA suspended its schedule. Then I knew we had entered some strange new era.

It doesn't help either, that the nonstop news cycle and social media keep us completely on edge. Even the things that are supposed to make it better seem overwhelming—like hundreds of great ideas on Facebook for how to keep your kids focused while they are off school. So now parents not only have to figure out how to get to work, or how to get work done at home, they also have to implement all these wonderful, creative, time-consuming ideas for their children. This stuff will make you crazy.

And rising up underneath it all is the fear of this strange new virus. The stories from other places where it has hit are scary. The graphs they keep showing us about it are scary. The assessments of how our health care system is equipped—or not equipped—to cope with this pandemic are scary. Who will get sick, and how sick will they get? Who will stay whole and well?

We don't know. We don't know where it is safe to go, or who it is safe to be with, and that uncertainty means that we're living on the fine knife edge of irritability and anxiety.

Except we do know. I know that we know, because we are here, still worshipping God. Because you are here, with us on the internet, wanting to hear it again. Wanting to know that it's true.

We do know where it's safe to go. It's safe to go right into the heart of God. We do know who it's safe to be with. It's safe to be with Jesus. We do know what the antidote is to uncertainty and fear and irritability and anxiety. It's the love of God poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

That's how the apostle Paul puts it, in his letter to the churches at Rome. Paul had never been to Rome. But he was planning to go there, and he wrote this letter to the Roman churches as an introduction, to proclaim the faith he had in Jesus Christ, and to outline his hope for the future.

Well, Paul did eventually get to Rome, but not as he had hoped. Instead, he arrived in Rome as a prisoner in chains, arrested for preaching the gospel and disturbing the peace one too many times. While held prisoner in Rome, there was a great fire, and the Emperor Nero blamed Christians for that fire. The apostle Paul was caught up in the persecutions that followed. He died there, in Rome, probably as a martyr in the Roman coliseum.

Paul knew about suffering. He had already been arrested, beaten with rods, shipwrecked, stoned, and flogged. He knew about a life lived on the edge, where his friends had to let him down outside the city walls in a basket so he could escape in the night.

And yet, he knew something more. He knew he was safe in the heart of God. He knew he was walking with Jesus. And he knew he was filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit, welling up in him like living water. And because of that knowledge, he could say:

*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,*

Hope does not disappoint us. Why?

because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

My friends, we do not know what the days ahead will bring. We know we are supposed to take care of our community by separating from one another, distancing, quarantining, hunkering down until this is over. We know we are supposed to wash our hands, a lot, for 20 seconds, and not to touch our faces, either. But apart from that, we really don't know much about what will happen next. We don't know if we will suffer--if we will suffer from loss of income as the economy struggles to cope with this, or if we will suffer by actually getting sick, or if we will just suffer from inconvenience and anxiety. We don't know. We just don't.

But we do know that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character...

Our character is going to be tested in the days ahead. What sort of people are we, really? Will they know we are Christians by our love, by our love, as the song says? Will we reach out to support those who *are* hurting in this crisis...even if we can't get within six feet of them? Will we continue to feed the hungry and care for the lonely? Will we share what we have with others, or just sit on that horde of toilet paper and bottled water we got piled up down in the basement?

I believe that we will. I know some of us have already reached out to support East Lansing public school families who use the school lunch program as a main sustenance. I know that we at All Saints will actively be seeking out opportunities for all of us to help those in our community who need help, who need funds, who need food. We'll keep you posted about those opportunities, because I know you will want to reach out.

I hope that we will reach out to one another too. If you don't have a copy of the parish directory, call the church office and we will mail you one. Use it to keep connected with one another. We are going to set up a "secret pen pal" program where you can get paired with another person in the parish to send them uplifting letters and notes as we go through these days. Or you can just reach out on your own. Write an email to an author in our Lent booklet sharing your thoughts about their meditation. Call one of our older members whom you haven't seen in a while. Don't lose touch. Part of our All Saints character is that we are loving and welcoming people. Don't stop being loving and welcoming, just because you've been told to social distance. Love can travel in all sorts of other ways. That is our character

And as Paul says, character produces hope. Hope! Yes! Hope for the future! Hope that we will get through this, hope that we will actually become better, kinder, more loving people because of this. Because nothing shows us how connected we really are to one another than an invisible virus. How connected we are to this whole complicated planet, and every human being upon it. And oh, I hope we can hang on to this sense of connection, even after the crisis passes.

Hope is so important. Because hope does not disappoint us. You can stand on it. It will hold you up. Even when you are stressing out. Even when you are afraid. Even when you are bored sick. Even when you are furious that students are still packing into the bars, or that the person across the street coughed on their hands, or that there are still no Clorox wipes at Costco. Hope does not disappoint us. And even if the virus comes here, even if it reaches into our membership, even if it grabs hold of someone we love, even then, hope does not disappoint us. Why?

Because God's love has been poured into us. Poured into our hearts. It's there for us right now. It will never run dry. It will never go missing. It will never be hoarded by someone else so that we can't get our share. God's unquenchable love is pouring into our hearts right now and it. Does. Not. Fail.

My fellow saints, my dear friends, we are going to get through this. And God willing, we will find blessings unimaginable in the midst of it. And we will find hope in the heart of it. And we will find love, God's love, holding us up and carrying us through, with every heartbeat, with every breath we take.