

“Grown-up Faith” (Romans 5:1-5) Pentecost 5, June 15, 2008

A few weeks ago, I was looking through Father’s Day cards, and once again I was amazed at the sheer variety -- from goofy to syrupy and everything in between! Equally amazing was that among all the things they gave thanks for, very few cards focused on a Dad’s spiritual role: being a spiritual mentor, coaching toward spiritual growth, showing by example what it looks like to be a grown-up Christian with a grown-up faith.

Maybe that’s a sign of the times, but it’s unfortunate, because if there was ever a time when kids needed spiritual grown-ups as role models, that time is now! Challenges these days are getting tougher and tougher. The choices we face are getting more and more complex. And who knows what the next generation will run up against?! Frankly, they’re not likely to do real well with just a baseline faith to go on. More than ever before, surviving and thriving in a spiritually hostile world is going to require a grown-up faith.

So what exactly is a grown-up faith? What exactly does it look like? That’s hard to say...exactly...but think of the teachings in Scripture that seem so high, so far above us, and that’s pretty much what grown-up faith looks like. For instance, holding grudges may come naturally, but grown-up faith puts its energy into forgiving. Getting even may come naturally, but grown-up faith tries to turn the other cheek. Wanting to be served comes naturally – and if we must do for others, it’s natural to want thanks. But grown-up faith isn’t like that. The focus is not on being served but serving, not on being thanked but expressing thanks. And above all else, grown-up faith is a resilient, tenacious faith, that not only survives the ups and downs of life, but thrives on them.

Paul gives us a good example in our text. He starts off confessing what we might call baseline faith – the minimum faith every Christian must have to be a Christian: **“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.”** You see why I call this baseline faith. I would hope everyone here could confess the same thing. Well, maybe not the “boasting” part – we are Lutherans, after all – but the gist of it. Confess that we’re saved by grace through faith; that thanks to the forgiveness Jesus won on the cross, **“we have peace with God”**; that thanks to His resurrection victory, we look forward to going to heaven one day and **“sharing the glory of God.”** That’s baseline faith.

But is that all there is to faith – being forgiven; going to heaven? Many Christians think so. But St. Paul didn’t. And Scripture doesn’t. Witness the rest of our text: **“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."

Okay, time to be honest. By show of hands, how many here can honestly say we "**boast in our sufferings**"? That's one of those *way up there* attitudes, isn't it? Sure, in theory we can understand it – how, with the right attitude, suffering can have a silver lining, in that it helps us learn endurance; and how over time endurance can then strengthen and deepen our character; and how that in turn can bolster our hope, because we see how God can bring good even out of something terrible and He proves faithful even when all seems hopeless. Yes, we can understand all that in theory. But it's kind of like being able to understand Felix Hernandez talking about the fine points of professional pitching. Or Brad Pitt talking about raising kids in the Hollywood limelight. Or Donald Trump talking about the best way to invest a few extra million dollars! We understand up here [*head*], but it's not something we've experienced – or ever expect to.

But here's the good news! Whether or not we ever pitch professionally, fight off paparazzi, or invest a few extra million, we can develop the kind of grown-up faith displayed in our text. It's not just for the spiritually elite. It's for every Christian. What's more, we can develop this grown-up faith the same way St. Paul did – over time, little by little, through the working of the Holy Spirit within us. It's true! We can become resilient, tenacious men and women of faith. We can get the point where we not only survive the ups and downs of life, but thrive on them. We can become spiritual grown-ups who model a grown-up faith. We can! In fact, that is God's invitation and God's call.

So why don't more Christians rise above the baseline? Why don't we see more examples of really grown-up faith? No doubt there are many reasons. Some may not realize how much more is possible. Some may not see any need to grow. Some may have good intentions of pursuing growth "someday" but just haven't gotten around to it yet. Many reasons. But one I'd like to talk about today is a very common obstacle to growth: what I call *Cosmetic Christianity* – Christianity that focuses more on looking good than becoming good.

Just to give you an image, years ago some friends named Tony and Rose took me to lunch at fancy French restaurant. This was long enough ago that everyone there was very well dressed. But then all of a sudden, three or four women walked in dressed in tennis outfits. As I was watching them be seated, I guess Tony and Rose were watching me, because Rose finally asked me, "What's wrong?" "Well, nothing's *wrong* exactly," I answered, "but this being such a fancy restaurant, it just seems strange that these women didn't change their clothes after playing tennis." Rose laughed. "They haven't been playing tennis," she said. "I doubt any of them ever go near a tennis court." "Then why the outfits?" I asked. Rose laughed again. "Because they like the look. These days everyone is supposed to be into fitness. Now, these women may not be, they may not

even feel like trying, but with a good tanning booth and the right tennis togs they can at least look the part. And that's what matters to them. Looking the part."

You get my drift? Change the location to church and think about the pressure to look *spiritually* fit, and you have a good idea what I mean by Cosmetic Christianity. It focuses on looking good – doing and saying the appropriate Christian things – rather than becoming good – really experiencing transformation in here [*heart*]. Now, outsiders often call this hypocrisy, and I suppose there is *some* truth to that, but what they don't realize – and we truly *must* realize – is that it's usually not intentional. Anything but!

For instance, suppose Joe Schmoe becomes a Christian. He knows that his sins are forgiven, and he's committed to following Jesus. But what should his new life be like? As he reads his Bible, he sees how a good Christian is supposed to operate. As he looks around the church, he sees a lot of people operating that way. So he naturally feels pressure to operate that way himself – both to honor God and to fit in – and so he does his best to look like a grown-up Christian.

But what Joe Schmoe doesn't realize is that spiritual growth takes time. Conversion is an on-going process. At the outset, your natural instincts, attitudes, priorities, and habits are all pretty unconverted. And there are no miraculous short-cuts. Over time – as you learn and apply, confess and commune, pray and practice your new faith – little by little the Holy Spirit will change you inside. But only over time. Little by little. As you practice your new faith. Not just like that! The thing is, there may not seem to *be* time. To Joe Schmoe, it may seem like people *expect* him to change just like that! Which means he cannot let them see how messy his spiritual life still is. He must not let them see how much inner work remains to be done. He feels he has to do whatever it takes to look the part: Joe Schmoe, Mr. Squeaky-clean Christian. And that can be such a trap! Because, of course, the more his energy goes into looking the part, the less energy there'll be for real change. And as years go by, he may stay trapped, may never rise above a baseline faith. Outwardly Joe may look like a grown-up Christian, but inside he's really not. It's just Cosmetic Christianity.

Someone needs to tell Joe there's more to following Jesus than just covering up spiritual blemishes! They can be changed and healed. Better still, someone needs to let Joe discover this for himself – in his own time, his own way – by giving him space for spiritual messiness and an understanding environment for doing his inner work. Churches aren't always good at that. Either we maintain the pressure to measure up or we lower the standards to accept "whatever." What's needed are high standards and acceptance. *Joe, this is what God wants you to become, and of course you're not there yet, but we're here for you every step of the way to help you develop a grown-up faith.* High standards and acceptance. Join that with practical guidance and encouragement, and what a difference that combination can make!

For an example of the environment I mean, I think back to a Bible study my home Pastor was leading on Romans 7, where Paul talks about his inner struggles – **“The good I would do, I do not do, and the evil I would not do, that I do.”** Well, Pastor told us about his own struggles – the example was impatience, I think – and how he said and did things that he really needed to ask God to forgive. My jaw just about dropped on the floor! I thought: *You, too, pastor? Whoa! Maybe I’m not such a lost cause after all.* Likewise, many years later, I went to a seminar for senior pastors, and in the course of his talk, the speaker casually mentioned some of the usual mistakes that are made managing a staff – things I had done and felt terrible about. Again my jaw dropped. *Why didn’t anyone tell me this was normal?* But often we feel like we’re the only ones who struggle, don’t we? Folks, we’re not! We all struggle in different ways with different things; sometimes we struggle the same way with the same things. And one of the best gifts we can offer each other is openness about that. Openness that balances high standards with acceptance, practical guidance with encouragement. That’s key to developing a grown-up faith.

One place we can practice this is in our homes. Of in the ups and downs of family life it can seem like the only two alternatives are maintaining high standards or accepting the unacceptable. But does it have to be so cut and dried? Can there not be time and room for growth? This being Father’s Day, let me just ask you dads: *What if you talked with your kids about some of your struggles and what’s been helpful to your spiritual growth? What if you talked about your own need of forgiveness – even asked forgiveness at times?* Think what a difference it would make for your kids to know you’re in the struggle together instead of giving the impression that you’ve arrived and they haven’t? How hard it can be for kids to feel they’ll never measure up! How helpful to see that growth is a process, that we can improve over time, and that we need to depend on God’s grace! High standards with acceptance; practical guidance with encouragement. Think how that could nurture grown-up faith in our homes!

We can also practice this in our church – in circles, classes, and Growth Groups. For instance, sometimes people are afraid to pray out loud. Maybe they’re shy. Maybe they don’t have much experience. But how are they going to learn without practice? And how are they going to practice without an environment where they feel safe bumbling and stumbling a bit? So to move ahead on this, maybe the group just has to step out beyond the comfort zone, not always relying on the ones who pray well.

Likewise, people may be afraid to admit there are things in the Bible they don’t understand...or agree with. Take today’s passage about **“boasting in our sufferings,”** and how **“suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.”** Some may respond: *Yeah, right. Like I’m ever going to embrace my suffering and grow through it!* So how do you deal with that? Instead of frowning at such sentiments or just saying “that’s okay,” what if we chewed on the passage together, prayed it through

together, applied what we could, and if necessary, left the door open for later discussion? That might be more conducive to growth, don't you think? High standards with acceptance, practical guidance with encouragement. It's key!

For the truth is, I have known a number of people who have learned to embrace their suffering and grow through it. Just yesterday I buried such a woman – Patti Roberts – whose attitude in the midst of suffering produced endurance, and then character, and even hope. But in each case, they didn't get there just like that! It was a process. It was a journey with plenty of bumps along the way. But by the grace of God they did get there. They did develop a grown-up faith.

That's God's goal for all of us. That's His invitation and His call. And whether we respond as individuals, as families, or as a church, there is always room for more growth, and there will never a better time to get going. Especially as a church, let us do our part to create an environment for growth – an environment of high standards with acceptance, practical guidance with encouragement. It might look a little messy at times, and it will certainly take some adjustments. But think what a difference it could make – being a church, creating an environment, that really nurtures grown-up faith. Amen.

