

Hope Against Hope  
Romans 5:1-11

I remember the place quite well. It was a hall with an auditorium. I want to say that the small town was Fremont, Nebraska. My family had gone there a couple of times in my childhood to attend flea markets. I remember that it was in that complex that I won two raffles (something that I was incredibly proud). One was 50 lbs. of beef from a local butcher. The second was 50 lbs. of fertilizer. I thought I was the king of the raffle.

One particular evening we were going to the auditorium for a revival by Mr. Gospel Guitar, a man named Dwayne Friend. It wasn't like we didn't know who Dwayne Friend was in this part of the world. He was a frequent Sunday morning preacher on our television from the Ozarks of Missouri.

As we approached the auditorium's doors a card table stood with a couple of people selling records of this performer. There were titles like: Just Me, Coming Your Way, Dwayne Friend Picks Happy Goodman Hits, and Dwayne Friend Sings, Writes, Picks. One of those signed albums would go home with us and would be cherished. I can still see it somewhere between the Blackwood Brothers, Johnny Cash's live at San Quinton, and Ethel Waters.

I must have been somewhere between 8 and 10 years old, and even though Dwayne Friend was in his middle age I was mesmerized by this performer when he came out on stage. He wore a Western polyester suit with sequins. His hair was perfect, and he was quite handsome. The guitar slung around his neck caught the floodlights and seemed to sparkle.

He played the guitar like no one I had ever seen. It was rockabilly gospel. Those fingers did things to make notes and I was sold. Unfortunately, the music was only part of the show. When the playing and singing were over Dwayne put his guitar on a stand and picked up his Bible. It was one of those Bibles which seemed to drape and drip down over the hand in which he was holding it.

My personal delight turned into something quite different. To call this hellfire and brimstone might undersell it. His description of the suffering that the reprobate would undergo while burning for eternity in the depths of hell was emblazoned upon my young mind. I had heard elaborate descriptions of hell from plenty of preachers, but this one was the most indelible.

It was then that he ratcheted up the intensity into something other preachers had not done up to that point in my young life.

"If you think you are a good Christian, if you think you have asked Jesus into your heart, if you think you follow Jesus Christ you could be wrong. Have you sinned, have you done something that would take that salvation away? Nothing could be worse than having the grace of Jesus Christ and then losing it because of sin, spending eternity in hell because you did not repent of every sin you have done in this world."

What? I could do everything I was told required of me and some secret sin could put me in Dwayne Friends hell?

From that day forward I became obsessed with my own young sinfulness. I was sure that there was a sin I had forgotten, and I would spend eternity rotting and sizzling in hell. I couldn't sleep for fear I would die in my sleep with an unconfessed sin. I tried, but I knew that every week I was finding out from my fundamentalist preacher things that I didn't even know were sins. How would I survive the afterlife as the person I was, a worm, full of sin?

I was in terror, worried, and in fear. I wanted to do what was right but felt there were things out of my control that would affect me, things that would be alien to me and would somehow infect my life with sin unknown and unseen by me. These invisible circumstances would forever alter me.

Those preachers manipulated my young mind on something that was an interpretation of scripture which was highly dubious and absolutely not the goal of our faith. Heaven or hell, while interesting concepts of debate, are not the goal. All these years later I realize that I was not really afraid of going to hell. I was terrified of the unknown.

I chose this Romans passage well before the coronavirus-covid19 had rapidly began to dominate every aspect of our lives. Yet, I can say with a degree of confidence through the many hours of phone calls and discussions that many of us are in terror, worried, and in fear. We want to do what is right but feel there are things out of our control that will affect us, things that are alien to us and will somehow infect our lives with the unknow and unseen. Will invisible circumstances forever alter us?

Hope in the face of suffering is the difficult answer that Paul presents this morning. It may seem difficult to feel hope when we face the unknown. With the government well behind on testing we know little about how many people are already sick or will be sick. We are in the midst of the unknown, with scientific experts daily, hourly updating us on he situation.

Still we are a people called to transform suffering into hope. How does Paul exemplify a movement from suffering to hope? We are justified by our faith, this justification brings about peace. What is the center of this justification that brings us to the Holy Spirit? It is exemplified by the sacrifice given to us by Jesus Christ, God's only son. Service. Jesus is the suffering servant to us. How can we do otherwise to each other in the midst of crisis.

Those of us who are immunocompromised must be very careful and let the rest of us know your needs. We already will be praying for everyone affected by this horrible virus, yet our faith is greater than our fears. Our faith is interwoven in each one of our members in this church and in the community itself. In the days ahead I am convinced our faith will be tested to participate in acts of service we may have never thought was part of our faith in Jesus Christ.

Yet for now call those you who are isolated, feed those who this will exacerbates their food insecurity, shop for those who cannot get into the public. Serve others. All things we are supposed to do anyway, but now we are being reminded how important and essential they are to our faith. In this midst of suffering we will not abandon hope. We will serve each other and our community because the author of our faith is the example of a suffering servant.

Be safe, be well, love yourself and each other. I thank God for each and every one of you.