

“When the Bloom Breaks”

Romans 5:1-5

May 30, 2010

When I was 16 years old, I borrowed my parent’s car to visit a friend whose house was in a heavily wooded yard reached by a circular driveway. When I left, someone was parked in front of me, so I backed out. Well, I backed their car into a pine tree and then proceeded to pull into dogwood. That is a terrible feeling to hear the scrape of metal. It’s really right up there with seeing blue lights in your rearview mirror. Or, watching a piece of your grandmother’s crystal fall to the floor, or removing your favorite Christmas ornament from your dog’s mouth.

I could so relate to a story that the N&O ran in January about a woman named Barbara Pate. She was having a tough time. Lost her job. Living with her parents while looking for employment. Her mother read an article about the beautiful amaryllis flower, and she wanted one for the holiday. So she and Barbara set out to bulb shop. They made their purchase, took the bulb home, followed the directions to a tee, and waited...and waited and waited for any sign of life...nothing. They thought they had a dud, but right before the holidays hit, leaves began sprouting and the bud appeared. The stalk grew bigger than they had imagined - it went way beyond the advertised 20 inches – finally, at 33 inches, the bud began to unfurl. It was stunning – so stunning that to call the flower just an amaryllis seemed inadequate so they dubbed her “Miss Mary.” She was an honorary member of the family. One cold January morning, Barbara picked up Miss Mary to carry her into the kitchen for the morning sun– and Miss Mary caught on the overhanging fireplace mantel – with one unfortunate turn, the stalk and the blooms that had brought them such joy literally dangled by a thread – almost completely severed. Barbara felt horrible – she had destroyed the plant that the entire family loved. A sinking feeling indeed.

That’s part of this thing called the human condition. Sometimes life is full of gorgeous blooming flowers, and sometimes the amaryllis dangles by a thread, and we get something that cannot be redone or repackaged in any way and we lose something important to us. The author Craig Barnes says, “We just keep losing things: wives, husbands, friends, health, the dreams and security of the past. Nothing stays the way it was.” He’s right. I have yet to meet an adult who is living the life he or she planned. Some are thrilled about that: “Thank God my life turned out so much better than I had hoped.” Some are a long way from thanking God for a loss of what was cherished. In the letter to the Romans, Paul was dealing with both groups.

What makes the letter to the Romans unique is that Paul did not personally know the church in Rome, but he knew that it consisted of both Jewish and Gentile Christians. On the one hand, Jesus Christ and the life of faith were new to the Gentiles – they did not have to reconcile long held religious beliefs with newfound hope in Christ. On the other hand, Rome had Jewish Christians too – who believed that Jesus was the Messiah but who did not want to lose their cherished rituals and traditions. Neither group was living with the God they had planned but both groups were living with the God who changed everything. Both groups were living with others who were not happy about their faith at all. There was tension wherever you turned. So, Paul wrote Romans almost as early Christian education. In the passage we study this morning, Paul is teaching that when it comes down to our lives – no matter how different they are from our initial plans, no matter how often they get interrupted, no matter how often they get chewed up or broken – our lives will always have value and purpose because of Christ.

That, of course, is easy for me to say from this pulpit. The sun is out. As far as I know, I’m in good health. My parents are doing well. I have a husband who loves me. I have friends.

I have a job. I can say pretty easily that, yes, Lord, when life hands you lemons, Jesus comes through with lemon meringue. But, what about when you break the amaryllis? Or, what about when you get interrupted and you can't tell the disease or death to 'stop it.' What about when life presses in on you from every side, and you can't get relief, you have no room to breathe, and it feels as though God has abandoned you and has left you to fend for yourself? What about then? What does it mean to live in THAT world as those who trust in this God?

Because, Christianity has its perks but it also has annoying quirks like even when we think we are tight with God, even when we think we are following God's call and we are doing everything that God asks of us, we don't get a pass on suffering or mean people or even bad days. We don't get a pass on disappointment, and we don't get a pass on the despair that wraps around us when God seems to let us down. As much as I would like to have a different message for you this morning – something a little more upbeat, as best I can tell, if we are planning on spending very much time following Jesus Christ, we just have to get used to the fact that we don't get a pass. Jesus kept trying to tell that to his disciples. He was always saying things like in Matthew 16: *Only those who lose their lives will find them.* Faith is no protection from pain.

Jesus was as good as it gets – more faith than anybody – and life gave him friends who abandoned him and betrayed him, a God he thought had forsaken him at the end, and a terrible cross to bear for people he did not even know. Most people of good sense would pull back from anything that demanded so much. Not Jesus. He faced everything head on. He held his ground. Instead of being run off, he showed us a new way to live. Paul captures it perfectly – I know he is usually wordy and hard to follow, but Paul is uncharacteristically eloquent in our verses with “suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint.” What a strong finish! “Hope does not disappoint.”

That's good stuff! That's the part of the Christian message that we really, really like – hope, hope for our children, hope for our future, hope for everything, so it bugs me that Paul starts that whole formula of hope with suffering and endurance. Is he cynical or just realistic? Someone asked if I enjoyed the celebration last week, and I said, “So much so that I am extending it for another month!” Celebrating the hope of the Spirit! Rockin' the world! People baptized and soaking wet with the power of God. It was a red-hot high. It did not disappoint. But, the fact of the matter is that I walked into this church on the Monday after all that – the phone was ringing off the hook, the bright red balloons that had been so festive at lunch were now deflated on the floor, and the copy machine was not working. It was the morning after.

In some ways, we've been living in the morning after ever since Pentecost. A spiritual high followed by real life. We are in good company. The disciples lived in it. And, Paul lived in it. In the early church, as full of the Spirit as they HAD to be to just survive, they still woke up on the morning after– the flames were gone, the air was still, and to top it all off, they broke the blooming amaryllis.

But, isn't that faith? Great highs when God is so close we feel his breath on our necks, and then the bloom breaks. What next? Paul's advice is surprisingly Pollyannaish– so much so, that you kind of want to slap him. ‘No matter how bad it gets, hold on – because suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint.’ I do believe that, when you are hurting, the last thing that is on your mind is how much you are building your character by another growth experience. When we are hurting, all we want is a little relief.

Our response, as people of faith, is usually to pray. We pray for our health to get better, for our marriage to work out, for success in our work that has taken a turn for the worse. There

is nothing wrong in praying for these things, but they are not what our salvation is about. Don't expect Jesus to save us by teaching us to depend on the things that sometimes hurt us. He loves us too much to let our health, marriage or work become the savior of our lives. There are worse things than feeling pain. There are worse things than losing your job, or having your feelings hurt. There are even worse things than death – and, pulling back, running away, wringing our hands in God's face and doing nothing ourselves...that is worse. If you refuse to face the things that make you uncomfortable or that have the potential to make you hurt, those things become your god. The standard for how you make decisions becomes how comfortable you are. If you will be comfortable, you do it. If there is risk of discomfort, you do not do it. But, the tragedy is that when our comfortable days finally come to an end – death cannot be avoided forever - we discover that we have never lived at all.

But, thanks be to God, that is not our only choice. Paul suggests that instead of running FROM potential pain, we can run TO God. Now, God does not promise safety. God promises endurance. God does not promise comfortable living. God promises real life. God does not promise freedom from pain, but God does promise freedom from fear. So, whatever it is that makes you want to run, whatever it is that makes you want to give up – and if you can't think of anything right now, don't worry, life comes at you fast, whatever it is, look it in the face. Give God the chance to get in your heart and show you that there is nothing so evil that He can't handle. Nothing so hurtful that he cannot redeem. Nothing so broken that life is gone for good. Look it in the face. Hold your ground. Do what you can, and then let God do his thing.

Remember Barbara Pate and her amaryllis? Once the break happened, she realigned the stalk pieces and asked her mother to get paper towels, stiff paper and packing tape. She bandaged that stem – she says, “We performed an emergency orthopedic procedure of a sort on the spinelike stalk of Miss Mary, using strips of computer printer paper for a splint.” They then set the injured plant in the kitchen. Barbara went to bed that night feeling terrible – I mean Miss Mary's unfortunate incident just exacerbated how hopeless she felt about her unemployment. “Sometimes,” she says, “when things are bad, even much lesser problems can be magnified.” But, she had done all she could. The next morning, she steeled herself and went to view the damaged flower. Not only had Miss Mary survived, she didn't even show a hint of a wilting petal. Aside from the large white bandage on the stalk, nothing else showed that the plant had nearly been decapitated. “My folks think that it was very unusual for the flower to have survived unscathed, but I like to think that it was a bit of a miracle showing that when the worst happens, if you take action and retain hope, one can survive and even flourish once more.”