

## “A place to stand”

June 3, 2007

Text: *Psalm 8, Romans 5:1-5*

### I.

Always, in Paul, there’s the sense that he celebrates his *sufferings*, which would seem to be contradictory. I mean, who celebrates *suffering*? (**a pill ... long-term therapy**)

In part, perhaps, it’s a reminder that Paul’s core belief as an Apostle finds its identity and its power at the foot of the cross of Christ. As a Christian, Paul’s place to stand is with Christ in his sufferings. For him, it is the suffering of Christ which inspires our own commitments.

In our reading from Romans this morning, Paul talks about *boasting of our sufferings*. In Philippians 3, he talks about how he wants to *know* Christ and somehow *share in his sufferings*.

If we think about it, our sufferings are in relation to what we really care about in life. Our **families** ... our life-time **commitments** ... our deep **convictions** about God and love and justice and values.

Our sufferings—our deprivations, the difficult and stressful times that we go through—point to the sufferings of every human being. These real-life experiences are situations that we learn from.

As Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 6, our sufferings and hardships teach us about patience ... kindness ... endurance ... holiness of spirit ... and genuine love. All of which produce *character* ... which is *our place to stand*.

So what does all of this mean? Out of our brokenness, new life comes ... on the wings of our sufferings and deprivation. And with the new life comes a new love ... and there’s more room in this love, because we’ve grown; there’s more tolerance ... patience ... empathy ... and compassion.

### II.

In the last thirty or forty years, the most popular brand of Christianity in the United States has always been some version of a *feel good* interpretation of faith. First, it was the *possibility thinking* of Robert Schuller. More recently, it’s the *prosperity gospel* of young, mega church preachers like Joel Osteen and others.

Sept. 18, 2006 issue of TIME ... *Does God want you to be rich?*

The point is not that these popular preachers don't teach and say many good things. The point is that their brand of the gospel isn't really the gospel at all. It's a very reduced, truncated version of the gospel, the sole goal of which is to make us *feel good*.

For *feel good* Christianity to have any substance; for it to be genuine, it must have something to do with the cross ... which, unmistakably, points to suffering and sacrificial love ... which has to do with empathy and compassion for the other person, the other group, the other nation.

There has to be some element of personal sacrifice, some spirit of repentance. Always, we gotta give up something. We have to meet people (other ethnic groups, other nations, other religions) half way; we have to find common ground so we can lift up the common good.

People ask me all the time about Joel Osteen and the *prosperity* gospel. Check it out! This is my problem with it all ...

### III.

George Adams had fallen on hard times in Ohio ... he'd lost his job, his family was struggling. But then, inspired by Osteen's insistence that one of God's top priorities is to shower blessings on Christians in this life-time, he and his wife packed up their family (four pre-teen boys) and moved to Conroe, Texas, a suburb of Houston, where Osteen has his large congregation.

With renewed self-esteem, he got a job as a car salesman and began to do well. Fair enough. But listen to his interpretation of his newly found success and how he relates it to his faith.

*It's a new day God has given me, he says. I'm on my way to a six-figure income. Soon, he says, he will buy his dream house. Twenty-five acres, he says. And three bedrooms. We're going to have a schoolhouse (his children are home schooled). We want horses and ponies for the boys, so a horse barn. And a pond. And maybe some cattle.*

*I'm dreaming big because all of heaven is dreaming big. There's nothing wrong with dreaming, even dreaming big, but then he goes on: Jesus died for our sins. That was the best gift God could give us. But we have something else. Because I want to follow Jesus and do what he ordained, God wants to support us. Why would such an awesome God not want us to be prosperous?*

Friends, it's not that God doesn't want us to do well and all the rest ... but, seriously, where's the cross of Christ in any of this? Where's the humble heart and the repentant spirit?

#### IV.

To tell the truth, *prosperity gospel* preachers are very good motivational speakers. And there's a lot of value in that (hey, their churches are full on Sunday mornings). But don't ever pass it off as the gospel of Jesus Christ, the gospel of the crucified one, the one whom God revealed to show us the depths and purposes of God's love.

The gospel of Jesus is the gospel of the one who died on a cross. He died because his life-purpose was to be faithful to God's calling. And the calling was all about neighbor love ... and reaching out to people in need. It's about the Christian virtues of *patience ... tolerance ... endurance ... generosity ... empathy ... compassion and forgiveness*.

Always, friends—for our faith to be Christian—there has to be a cross at the center. It's the cross that calls us to repentance (to deal with our sin) and to the realization that at times our lives are at cross-purposes with God's purposes. Which means, all the time, we have to approach God with a confessional heart.

This is where Paul and his writings to the early church are so helpful.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is NOT a *feel good* gospel. It's a gospel that calls us to repent of our ways, and to seek, everyday, to turn toward God.

In the feel good gospel, there's no sin. There's no encounter with the temptation of greed and pride and sloth and excessive self centeredness. Therefore, to present the gospel as such is to radically misrepresent it.

#### V.

The most faithful place to stand as Christians is always in the midst of the poor ... in the midst of the little ones ... the ones whose needs cry out to us. The ones who need to be healed; the ones who need to be fed; the ones who need to be educated and empowered and then sustained over time.

When we've lost a loved one ... when we're seriously distressed in our family life ... when our fears and anxieties, our failures and rejection have come too close ... when we feel sad and lonely and isolated, we don't need to hear that God wants us to be wealthy and prosperous.

At the end of the day, that's all fluff and annoyingly superficial.

What we need is to be reassured that we are loved ... and forgiven ... and that we are valued and accepted as we are ... by the saving grace of God.

And once we come to feel God's love and to feel reassured in the faith, what the gospel calls us to do (our place to stand) is—not to pray that God will grant us more

prosperity—but, rather (what the gospel calls us to is ...), to share with others ... and to be generous and compassionate with other human beings and other cultures ...

## VI.

And so, along with Paul, we boast in our sufferings because these sufferings draw us close to God. These sufferings, these tough times, they produce in us *endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does NOT disappoint ... because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Spirit.*

Our place to stand is with the ones, therefore, who are being left out ...

- the ones deprived of justice and fairness ...
- the ones who don't have health care ...
- the ones born into poverty,
- who are deprived of quality education ...
- the ones who, try as they might, are under paid and under valued ... and therein nudged to the outer edges of community life ...

When the sun sets each day, our lives are not about our earthly riches and achievements—although they are certainly not to be disdained. Our lives are about being faithful to the God of infinite love and mercy—the God who loves every human being and who wants so desperately for us to find ways of honoring the gift of life in all our faith traditions.

Always, it's our place to be humble and thankful.

As the **psalmist** reminds us:

*Oh God, you have set your glory above the heavens ...  
And what are we human beings that you are mindful of us??*

*Yet, you have showered us with your endless blessings.  
O Lord, our Mighty God, how majestic is your name!*

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz  
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*  
6701 Miami Lakeway South  
Miami Lakes, FL 33014  
On the web at [www.mlchurch.com](http://www.mlchurch.com)

