

Title: “The Heritage of Suffering”

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Col 1:24

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Service Readings: Gen 18:1-14, Col 1:21-29, Luke 10:38-42

“Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake...” What is there to rejoice in when it comes to suffering and how can Paul make such a statement? He knows that to be incorporated into the body of Christ means not just to share in the waters of Holy Baptism but to share in the blood of Jesus Christ. He rejoices because he is connected with this suffering and that means that he is connected to the one who suffered.

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Where were you on the evening of July 4, 2022? Yes. I am aware that it was only a couple weeks ago, but still ask: where were you? For many of us, it was spent gathered together under a canopy of fireworks in celebration of our freedom. We weren't there, over 200 years ago when our forefathers fought the war. We didn't suffer injury, didn't watch our loved ones die. But we still find connectedness with those who did. We still “latch on” to this history as though it was our own... And *it is* our own, for we *are* Americans, and this *is* our heritage. And this heritage is what unites us with each other, with those in the present, and with those in the past. We are bound by this heritage; we identify as *one people* because of it. And even if we immigrated from another land, even if we bring *that* heritage with us, we *still* graft ourselves to the American heritage and call it our own.

And even when our country seems to be more divided than ever, even when we seem to be a people who can't agree on anything of any importance, there seems to be something about reflecting on our heritage that pulls us together stronger than little else. And it doesn't have to even be July 4th. It can be *any* event that turns our gaze backwards to the sufferings and challenges of our forefathers. Even something as seemingly simple as our national anthem.

O say, can you see
By the dawn's early light
What so proudly we hail'd
At the twilight's last gleaming?

These words stop all activity, pause all conversations, and encourage all who hear to gaze upon the flag to proudly recall what it took, what great sacrifice was required, to become people of this nation. This poem, later set to music, was born from the very struggle that today we continue to boast about.

On the morning of September 14, 1814, Francis Scott Key cast his view onto Fort McHenry; there he saw the American flag rising on the pole. That flag represented victory from a British attack that had

just ended. And even though he was not at the fort, even though he was not part of the fight, that flag connected him to those soldiers who were. He shared in their joy of victory through that flag. And he shared, also, in their suffering. That flag was, in part, his connection to the heritage that was forming this new nation. He was a part of it through that flag.

And just like us, we Americans, as individuals, also find connectedness with this heritage through symbols and song. Just as Francis looked upon the flag that morning and felt connected to this people, we too look upon the flag and share in the suffering of those who fought. And even more, we are *proud because we are connected* to them, those who struggled, those who suffered, those who died. We take pride in this connectedness, while at the same time recognizing the tension between that pride and sorrow. The suffering becomes a badge of honor for us, even if we were not the ones who experienced the physical pains. But the battles that define who we are didn't stop after we won our freedom. They continued, and still continue to this day. And for those who fight for our freedom, that badge becomes even more important because their suffering, their *actual suffering*, connects them in a way that makes our heritage personal, intimate.

<pause>

And so, is it any wonder that when we consider the heritage of the Christian church we include and rejoice in suffering as well. Paul speaks of this in today's Epistle passage:

²⁴ Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, ²⁵ of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, ²⁶ the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. ²⁷ To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. ²⁸ Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹ For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

In his letter, Paul is teaching the people of Colossae about the heritage that they have been grafted onto. And in this portion of the letter he describes it in terms of suffering. But unlike our American heritage, Paul doesn't point to the suffering of himself or other Christians as that foundation. No! He says that the heritage of this church is built not on the suffering of all, but on the suffering of one. This Christ. The one who experienced the anguish of the cross. The one who experienced the agony of separation with the Father. This Christ. His suffering is the only suffering that matters, the only suffering that forms the foundation of the very heritage that we share in.

This is the suffering that Paul rejoices in. He knows that to be incorporated into the body of Christ means not just to share in the waters of Holy Baptism but to share in the blood of Jesus Christ, to share in the suffering that Jesus experienced for us. He rejoices because he is connected with *this* suffering and that means that he is connected to the one who suffered.

And so he rejoices in the sufferings caused by this connectedness. He rejoices in what the world inflicts upon him because he knows that this means he is a part of Jesus' heritage and that is the only one that matters.

Our nation was formed when a flag was first raised in celebration of a war that was fought and won. The cloth, with its red and white stripes, proclaimed to the world a people that was newly formed and a freedom that was given.

Christ's church was formed when our Jesus was raised on a cross and then raised again from the dead in celebration of a war that was fought and won. His resurrection proclaimed to the world a people that was newly formed and a freedom that was given. You see, it was not by the stripes of a flag but by the stripes of his body that we have been set free.

Please pray with me.

Lord,

It is through your suffering that we find eternal freedom. Instill in us hearts that long for you, that rejoice in the suffering that we experience because we are your people. Give us strength and courage to proclaim your word even in the midst of it.

Amen.