

“Access Holiness”

Rev. Michelle Madsen-Bibeau

June 16, 2019

Trinity Sunday, Father’s Day

First Congregational Church of Haddam

Higganum Congregational Church

Romans 5:1-5

“Therefore 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. 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.”

My sister-in-law is a rock star. I don’t mean that metaphorically. My husband John’s younger sister literally is the lead singer for a band called Beebs and Her Money Makers based in Florida. They were in the Van’s Warped Tour a few years ago when they came through Hartford, played at Toad’s in New Haven on my 45th birthday, and we saw them most recently somewhere in Massachusetts.

All to say that, thanks to being related to my husband, and thanks to my sister-in-law’s hard work, I now occasionally enjoy special access. The bouncer had our names on a free entrance list at the place in Massachusetts. I got wished “Happy Birthday” from the stage at Toad’s. And my family got to hang out in the performers’ trailer area at the Warped Tour.

That last one was when I discovered that being in the band is not necessarily as glamorous as it looks from the outside. It’s no doubt different for tours with major headliners, but the Warped Tour is sort of intentionally egalitarian, and for two or three months of the summer the performers mostly stay in the trailers they or their sponsors can afford, which often means *with* air conditioning, but *without* running water. The tour director and his budget determine how frequently nights in parking lots are interspersed with nights in hotels. The idea of having to clean up using a camping shower- you know, a black bag hung from tree if you can find one or the back of the van if you can’t- after sweating through two daily stage performances in the summer sun was piteous.

So much to our surprise the year we were in town when the Warped Tour came through, after we used our special access tickets, and met the Moneymakers, and saw their Ripley’s-Believe-It-or-Not-sponsored living quarters, we invited them home for their scheduled day off and then raced them to our not-ready-for company house. A bit of a mad scramble later, and I was welcoming near strangers to use even the scary downstairs shower, which they’d see in any case since it’s next to the washer and dryer.

They were amazing guests. They played cards, and instruments- without amplification- late into the night, and graciously only smoked in their trailer. They expressed gratitude for everything: the dinner and breakfast pulled together thanks to the late and early hours of our local Stop and

Shop, the consistent wireless to download movies for the road and update their webpage, the laundry and showers as mentioned, and in one South Carolina guy's case for our big maple, which he scaled to a height of about 35 feet saying it reminded him of home, a feat never since equaled, in particular because I immediately forbade anyone related to me to try. Their presence certainly upped our "cool" factor in our neighborhood, at least for a day or two- fame is so fleeting, you know?

Well. Centuries ago theologians of the Church looked for a way to explain in words the experiences Believers have of what Paul calls "this grace in which we stand" and to make the case for our "hope of sharing the glory of God." How can we, mere humans, with so many flaws and foibles, make a claim to being welcomed by and to knowing a God of perfect holiness, justice, love, and power?

The Trinity is what they came up with. Knit together from bits scattered across the pages of the Hebrew and Greek scriptures, the idea of God as a "three-person unity" helps us talk about the "access" we have to the inaccessible.

It's part creation and part adoption to speak of God as our Father. The one who spoke the universe into existence and knit us together in our mothers' wombs provides for and loves us unremittingly, and also cautions and corrects us, teaches and guides us.

The Son, the second person of the Tri-unity of God, worked on our behalf, bearing our sins on the cross and redeeming us and ultimately all Creation.

And the Holy Spirit comes and abides with us, but unlike my houseguests, taking up *permanent* residence, connecting and transforming us.

But, and here's where the mystery of the Trinity comes in, these three persons, each with a particular role vis a vis humanity, remain inseparably one.

The persons of the Trinity are one in purpose. When on earth, Jesus prayed to his Father, "not my will, but yours" as an outward sign that in reality there was no difference, could never be. The Father is in the Son, the Son in the Father, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus and was present hovering over the waters of Creation. Trinitarian Christians claim that we, like Jews and Muslims, believe in ONE God, not three. We enter into relationship, claiming our access, as we are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

My sister-in-Law the rock star is the same one person whether she is texting her brother about her nieces, dancing, singing, and playing the kazoo on stage, or sipping tea with lemon for her throat in my living room. These aspects of herself can be said to be in relationship with each other; the relative, the worker, and the guest. But they are not severable from each other, they do work together but in the way of a body, not like three tools pulled out separately as the need arises.

We stand in grace because of the plan and work and presence of the One God. We hope to share in glory because the Triune God invites us in.

And so, Paul teaches, we take no credit for ourselves, but only “boast,” or “glory” in what God has done and will do...

And, he continues, in our suffering.

At first this sounds strange. We know we’re not supposed to brag about how great we are. But rarely does anyone need to be told not to brag about their troubles!

But the Greek word is not “boast” in the sense of talking oneself up. It means to keep one’s neck straight, basically to hold our heads high, or stand tall.

Translated that way, we read, “we also keep our heads up in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.”

It reminds me of one of my favorite Father’s Day movies, the *Pursuit of Happyness*.

The movie is based on the life story of Chris Gardner, played by Will Smith in the film.

It takes some liberties with the actual story, but the basic outline is accurate: Chris Gardner is a homeless father caring for his son while trying to get ahead. They stay where they can, from a family shelter at Glide Memorial Church, to the floor of a BART station bathroom. Chris eventually succeeds in the San Francisco stock broker training program he’s attending, and eventually becomes a wealthy man.

The film, like Paul’s passage here, focuses not so much on that period of final glory, though, but on the hope, the character, the endurance, and the suffering that come before.

And in the midst of it, we see represented a moment between Chris and his namesake son. His dad is giving him a bath in not-ideal circumstances, and young Christopher suddenly pronounces, "Poppa, you know what? You're a good poppa."

The glory is our hope for the future, so we can keep our heads up. We are children of a Good Poppa, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and whose creation, redemption, and care of us are promised and sure. May we sense his love poured into our hearts, today, and always. Amen.