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Romans 5:1-5

*Faith*

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Romans 5:1-5 New Revised Standard Version

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.

I grew up in a family that went to church. I don’t really remember much about Sunday School or Confirmation besides the ten plagues. For some reason, the ten plagues with Moses stuck with me. I don’t know that I could articulate what I believed when I was growing up, but I knew that I loved Jesus and Jesus loved me. I knew that God is and that God is good. And I loved going to church. At church everyone was so nice and loving and I was just so happy when I was at church. And there were always donuts. I got involved in the youth group and in the youth choir and there was nowhere else I would rather be on a Sunday morning or Sunday evening. In fact, I got my first two speeding tickets on the way to church! I sang with the youth choir in the 8 am worship service every single Sunday. I stayed for Sunday School and then watched the children in the nursery. I would go home, eat lunch, take a nap and come back for choir and youth group. I felt like I belonged at church. It was my home.

I knew that when I was confirmed in 6th grade I was making a commitment to Jesus Christ, and that by joining the church I was promising to be a part of the church. When I joined Chapelwood UMC in Houston Texas where I was confirmed, I promised to faithfully participate in the ministries of that church with my prayers, my presence, my gifts, and my service. Prayers - It was easy to pray for the church and the world. Presence - It was easy to be present because I loved being there. Gifts - I must admit to you that I was not very good at sharing my financial gifts with the church. Yes, I sang, and watched the kids in the nursery, but my money was mine, all mine. It wasn’t until I took a Crown financial class that I opened myself up to the idea that everything that I have is God’s. I am the stewards of the money and resources that God has given me. It is all God’s, not just the 10% that we give to our church. Service - It was easy to serve, and going on mission trips with my church were a huge part of my faith development. I have learned in my life when I faithfully participate in the ministries of the church with my prayers, my presence, my gifts, and my service, my faith life is richer, deeper.

In 2008 the General Conference of the United Methodist Church added witness to our membership vows. Witness. I can witness that life isn’t always sunshine and roses. When I was a junior in high school my stepdad was in a car accident and as he had surgery all night, the hospital waiting room began to fill with our church family. As I tried to make sense of this tragedy, I knew that God did not cause any of it. God did not cause the car crash that ultimately killed my stepdad. I knew that through all the tragedy, through all the suffering, God was with me, and the church was the community that made the love of God come alive for me. The church community, the church family, witnessed to me that God was present and not fixing the pain, but making it bearable. The church has always been my home.

Today we are worshipping together, singing together. We help the poor, we feed the hungry, we live out God’s kingdom in the world. The Imagine No Malaria campaign that the United Methodist Church started has reduced malaria deaths by half by giving 2.3 million bed nets in Africa. We have trained 11,000 health workers in Sierra Leone, Angola, Zimbabwe, and Democratic Republic of Congo that go door-to-door delivered and installing bed nets. Here at Greenland Hills we have a relationship with Juarez and have built many homes for families. In January we built two homes and we saw Hector who we built a home for last year. And Hector picked up a shovel and helped us make the concrete for his neighbor’s house. Then Hector asked to be our facebook friends and we are able to see his family grow up and we can’t wait to see him next January.

The United Methodist Church is a global church but it is also Greenland Hills. We are ready for justice for our LGBTQI brothers and sisters, but some in the rest of the world are way behind us. And at our worldwide gathering of the United Methodist Church which happened the last two weeks, people were elected all around the world to represent and help lead the United Methodist Church in the matters of the Church, to review our disciplines, our doctrines and our laws. That every four-year meeting is called the General Conference and it is a democracy, everyone’s vote has equal weight.

There was so much disagreement at this meeting that the Bishops said the church had a broken heart and we needed the Holy Spirit to mend it. Prayers were offered asking us to to be open to God’s spirit, to be open to God’s nudging so that we would see the good around us and in one another. “My, my, my,” Bishop Sally Dyck prayed, “look at those United Methodists. They don’t agree, but they sure will love one another. As the Apostle Paul said to the people in Rome in our Scripture, “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

 It seems that we United Methodists around the world are committed to staying together as a family. Our unity is found in Jesus. The first Methodist John Wesley said, “Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?” It is so easy to get on sides, but I want to be on the side of God and God loves everybody. We are Greenland Hills United Methodist Church and we are a church that wants to live out the Gospel’s teachings of grace, love, justice and inclusion for all of God’s children. After all, the United Methodist Church was the first denomination to adopt resolutions advocating for equal civil rights for LGBT people in 1972.

 I believe strongly that the United Methodists in the United States need a forum for their own issues. Period. And I do agree that building relationships with people is how there is unity. As soon as you know someone and have a relationship with someone who is transgender, then you are done with this bathroom debate. I am done with this bathroom debate. As soon as you know someone who is LGBTQI then it isn’t an issue, it is people that you love and that you see being discriminated against. As soon as you have a relationship with someone in a wheelchair, then handicapped accessibility becomes something that you care deeply about.

 Think about God, we believe in a Triune God – three in one, Father, Son and Holy Spirit and this Triune God exists in complete united relationship. We are called to be in relationship with one another. That for me is what being a part of a church is all about. In a church we can talk about our faith and see different perspectives, and learn from one another.

A few years ago Greenland Hills wrote out their values and they said “We do real, authentic spirituality. That means we seek real relationship with a living God and we seek real relationship within community . . . even when it’s messy (and often it is). We think all people are God’s Beloved. Yes, we mean those who are GLBTQ . . . and every other person you might have in mind. We treasure beauty. In vibrant music, striking art, expressive words, ordinary surprises. That means we think God shows up in the world now . . . in all kinds of ways. We ask the hard questions about life and faith. So our faith will become our own. We think our primary purpose is to live and love as Jesus did. That means we are building a world where compassion and justice are the standard of living for all people. We are many people doing lots of things to help God change the world.

We all still have much to learn and our understanding of God and of the life of faith will change and grow over time. Christianity is hard. It calls us to act against our deep instinct by trying to love our enemies. Being a Christian means letting God love you, even when you sometimes don't feel very lovable. It means reciprocating that love, or loving God back. And it means living out your faith by doing what you can to mediate God's grace to a wounded world. When you join a family of faith you are set apart for God’s work for the rest of your life. God became flesh in Jesus and when we love God we find the fullest life possible. In a world of hurt and pain, the grace of God is living water in the desert and bread for a soul that longs for deeper meaning. This faith, this God, this grace will fill our life beyond our wildest imaginations. But a life of faith is messy because the Spirit of God will poke and prod you into unknown places. Our values, our prejudices, our comfort zones will all be turned on their head. But if we can give faith a chance, those places of discomfort will bless us, they will give us courage and hope for all our days.

The Christian church is not a place to get comfortable. It is a place to be transformed. Through my life I have learned that to be Methodist means to think critically about your faith. To be Methodist means to care about the world outside the church. To be Methodist means casseroles and potlucks. To be Methodist means third grade Bibles and Confirmation. To be Methodist means singing and four-part harmony. To be Methodist means communion and Welch’s grape juice and everyone welcome at the table. To be Methodist means infant baptism and sprinkling or pouring or dunking. To be Methodist means silent night on Christmas Eve with candles. To be Methodist means Sunday School and UMYF. To be Methodist means the children’s sermon is usually better than the sermon. To be Methodist means children in church. To be Methodist means prevenient, justifying and sanctifying grace. To be Methodist means God is and God is good.