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Proper 15 C  
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Fire, pain, suffering, division, and family strife; those are some of the common themes that run through the readings for today, and I'm sure that's what got you out of bed and to church this morning. The hope of hearing about fire, pain, suffering, division, and family strife. A cloud of corporate angst has hovered over the nation this week not because of the usual shenanigans in the political arena but because preachers everywhere have agonized over how to deal with these propers. How are we supposed to squeeze out a message of hope, of good news from these lessons.

I once heard a friend of mine, another priest, say that in most cases a person has to suffer in order to grow spiritually. I remember that when I heard him say this that I did not like it. And the reason I didn't like it wasn't because it was false or because I disagreed with him in anyway, but because it really hit home like the truth always hits home. Suffering is never a guarantee of spiritual growth, but there is almost always the opportunity, depending how we respond and deal with suffering, to experience profound spiritual growth.

Most of us just bounce along through life very unintentionally in terms of spiritual growth until something unexpected happens. A disappointment in a person we trust, a bad report from the doctor, maybe even losing our job or worse yet, or maybe even losing someone we love. Whatever the precipitous event, we suffer. And if we have the wisdom or the courage or the grace of God, we somehow make the right decisions in response to the crisis and endure this suffering, and then something rather paradoxical happens; at our depths, during this bad time, we actually grow and become more of the person God knows we are. In that sense, I don't think God sends this misfortune, but I do think that God redeems our suffering.

I once heard Peter Gomes, the late, former Chaplain at Harvard University, interviewed on National Public Radio and he said that the real measure of a person isn't the times in life when he or she is successful, but rather how the person deals with the failures in life. Gomes' wisdom resonates well with the readings today about not necessarily winning the race but exercising the patience and endurance to simply run the race.

In this day and age in the world and even in the Church, the concept of endurance seems to take a backseat behind the concepts of feelings, fulfillment, freedom, and self-expression. The virtue of endurance is not valued in the same way today that it once was.

It is impossible for me to think about endurance without thinking about my maternal grandparents, Dan and Verna Curton. My grandmother gave birth to my mother on the brink of the Great Depression. Young couple, sharecrop farmers, newborn infant, and the Great Depression; bad combination. But to hear my grandmother tell it, the Great Depression was a great adventure. She told me about all the ways they survived. How my grandfather would cut wood and haul it into town to sell for the little cash they had and how lucky they were to live on a farm and be able to grow food and how they gathered food that grew wild as well. When I came home from that visit I told my mom that Grandma had told me all about the Great Depression and that I was hoping for another one. My mother gave me that look that said, "What on earth is cutting off the oxygen to this child's brain."

3) There is a version of Christianity that says that if you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior that your life will be changed and that everything will be rosy, all of your problems will disappear, you will no longer suffer, you will prosper and enjoy all the material creature comforts of this world. Sort of follow Jesus and hit the lottery. I'm pretty ecumenical in my perspective; I am comfortable with various denominational tribes, but I have to say that that particular message originates from the darkest side of our religious tradition. The very first part is true; if you choose to respond to God's love and follow Jesus on this great adventure, your life will indeed change. But there will still be pain and suffering; catastrophes and great challenges. Life may even get much harder than it was before. If you don't believe me read your Bible.

And yet, paradoxically, those who choose to make the journey, those who dare to embark on the adventure, sometimes even at the most difficult times of suffering in life, discover an inextinguishable joy and a peace that passes all understanding. Jesus did not come to be the Caspar Milquetoast poster boy for mushy, anemic placidity. Jesus, the incarnate God, came to turn the world upside down and Jesus came to turn your life upside down as well. I'm one of those Christians who believes that sanctification and even conversion is not a one-time event but rather a process that goes on for a lifetime. A process in which time after time with our eyes wide open we respond to the call of God to follow Jesus yet another day. So what will it be today? Jesus stands inviting you to continue with endurance yet another adventure in this journey with God. May God give us the grace, the courage, and the endurance to say "yes" again and again. Amen.