

“One Thing Leads to Another”

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Scripture: Romans 5:1-5

Therefore, since we are set right with God by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him 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 hardships, knowing that hardship produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not let us down, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Sermon:

“One thing leads to another.” People have been saying that a long time. “One thing leads to another” was a proverb even back in the days of ancient Rome: “*A verbis ad verbera.*” The idea is, things go from bad to worse. Things go wrong. “From words to punches:” that’s the meaning of the Latin phrase. From shouting to fist fights. And that’s also the tone of a 1983 rock song by The Fixx called “One Thing Leads to Another:”

“Then it’s easy to believe,” they sing,
“Somebody’s been lying to me
But when the wrong word goes in the right ear
I know you’ve been lying to me
It’s getting rough, off the cuff
I’ve got to say enough’s enough...
One thing leads to another.”

I imagine we’ve all known times (I know I have) when things just seem to keep getting harder and harder. And we’ve known people for whom nothing seems to work out right. One thing leads to another. Frustration leads to hurt, hurt leads to anger, anger leads to rage. Distress leads to disappointment, disappointment leads to giving up, and giving up leads to despair.

And it sometimes seems there’s not much you or I can do about it. I’ve always liked the story about a certain discouraged and dejected person who said, “I was in the worst place I’ve ever been in my life, and I was feeling very depressed about it, when somebody said to me, ‘Cheer up! Things could be worse.’ So I cheered up -- and wouldn’t you know it, things got worse.”

We find a one-thing-leads-to-another chain -- maybe you noticed it -- in the section we read from the Bible today. But this one is altogether different. This sequence is upside-down, if you will. It is all to the good. It begins in a difficult place: with troubles, with hardship, suffering, affliction -- what Bibles sometimes call by that quaint old word, tribulation. But instead of going from bad to worse, according to this one-thing-leads-to-another progression, “hardship produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.” (*Romans 5:3-4*) All to the good.

Well, whatever the trajectory, whether from difficulty to despair, or hardship to hope, we are all moving on in one direction or another, spiritually and in every other way. We are always in process. Paul got that right. You can’t stay static. For good or for bad, one thing does lead to another.

But I have a hunch that St. Paul's "pick yourself up and dust yourself off" scenario we find in the Bible -- hardship, endurance, character, hope -- is a lot easier said than done. A happy outcome is not guaranteed. Maybe that's because we don't seem to have the whole recipe. It's as if Paul left something out of his formula for dealing with troubles, as an expert chef might leave out an ingredient when you ask her for a recipe. Seems to me this whole one-thing-leads-to-another concoction needs to have something more poured into it to catalyze it, something more to ferment it, something more than what is already inside us, in the mix, something additional which has the capacity to cause you and me to move from difficulty to stamina to fortitude to hope.

And sure enough! There it is, the extra ingredient, down at the end of the recipe, so to speak: God's love. "Hardship produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not let us down -- because God's love has been poured into our hearts." (*Romans 5:3-5*) The ingredient that kick starts us from hardship to hope and empowers us along the way, the element which offers us a future that is different from our present and our past, which raises us from the quagmire we feel we're stuck in right now -- that ingredient is not found naturally within us. It comes from beyond us. It comes from God. It is love which engenders hope.

Hope doesn't have to do with anything inside us. Hope has to do with what is before us -- with possibilities which open up ahead of us, and which offer us new spaces for loving and living, and offer us those possibilities right where we are today. With a love you and I can count on "poured into our hearts," there's no need any more to stay stuck in our own concerns, no matter how overwhelming they may seem. Hope based in the love of God has the capacity to turn our heads, re-direct our focus, point us in a new direction. It pulls us, you could say, out from under the pressures of our present circumstances when we find ourselves with too many difficulties on our hands, too many challenges, too much tribulation. Simply telling yourself to cheer up won't do it. But looking through the lens of faith at the possibilities hope presents to you and me just may have the power to draw us, heart and soul, from hardship to endurance to character to hope.

Hardship will endure, endurance will ensue, character can emerge. But hope, the key in this one-thing-leads-to-another progression, becomes possible because of our God, who is lavish with love, who wants the fullness of life for every single one of us, indeed, for every single person in all creation. On this weekend, as we remember those who have given their lives in the defense of our country, that others may live, let us celebrate the hope which enabled them to endure hardships and inspired their gift. Hardship, endurance, character, hope -- because God's own love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given even to us.

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