

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes:

“. . . 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 . . . ” (Romans 5:2b-4).

This week these verses stirred deep wonderment in me –

I wondered . . .

Do we suffer *because God intends for us* to grow through suffering?

Or is it *rather the case* that in many instances, when we suffer,

we grow through suffering by the grace and through the mercy of God?



How easy it is to come away from these verses believing

that Paul is blessing affliction for affliction’s sake,

that Paul is setting forth

the three stages of self-improvement and spiritual renewal,

that Paul is offering us a simple, step-by-step process!

How easy it is to come away from these verses believing

that what Paul shares in them

is true for all people in all times in all suffering!



Beloved, something deep within me rails against the notion

that, in these verses from Romans,

Paul is sanctifying suffering

or sharing the three stages for highly hopeful people
or revealing something that is true
for all people in all times in all suffering.

Because Paul is not writing to an individual, but to a community.

Paul is not writing about things that are abstract or rhetorical,
but lived experiences of division and history,
culture and exclusion, religious and political tension that are real.

Paul is not writing to bolster individual confidence and hope,

but to summon an inspired, *communal witness* of compassion.

And who reminded me of this? I'm so glad you asked.

Our youth . . . while we were on pilgrimage.



Many of you know that from Friday, May 30, through Saturday, June 6,

eighteen youth from Holy Trinity and St. Paul's Atlanta

were on pilgrimage in St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

For the better part of the last ten months,

parishioners at St. Paul's and I planned this pilgrimage.

We secured excellent rates for airfare, meals, lodging, and

financial support from the wider church, the Diocese,

and parishioners from both churches; communicated the costs;

organized an itinerary that included formation, service projects,

fellowship, and tours of St. Croix;

met with our adult chaperones and youth pilgrims;

and readied ourselves for the experience of a lifetime.



When we arrived at our hotel situated right off the ocean,
everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

And yet, as English novelist and poet, Thomas Hardy, wrote:

“Nothing bears out in practice what it promises incipiently.”

Our first night at the hotel, there was a power outage.

Some of our youth and one adult chaperone

were without hot water in their showers for two days.

Two rooms in which four youth were staying flooded.

The front, passenger-side tire of one of our vans blew out.

Hotel management confused our dinner schedule,

and on our final night in St. Croix, did not prepare dinner for us.



Even so, amid these hardships, extreme heat and humidity, mosquitoes,

flying roaches, splinters, blisters, fiberglass, and rain,

our youth rose every morning at 6am.

Our youth led us in Morning Prayer to begin

and Compline to end each day.

Our youth cleaned up a 1-mile stretch of a St. Croix beach preserve,

collecting sixteen bags of trash, a toilet, iron rods,

and a piece of linoleum flooring.

Our youth worked with local youth to beautify Claude O. Markoe School,

repairing latticework on fencing, planting trees,

and tending the school's garden.

Our youth worked with the good people of Way of the Cross Church
over two days to complete demolition and cleanup work
in two buildings on the church campus.

Because the aforementioned mishaps and extreme conditions
did not ruin their community *but revealed it*.

Because each day, in the midst of it all,
our youth chose compassion;
our youth chose to *suffer with one another*.



Each day, our youth chose compassion together.

They responded to each other's needs together.

They played and argued and reconciled.

They were vulnerable with each other.

Extroverts could be themselves

and introverts received space and time to come out of their shells.

They formed little cliques and transcended them.

Amid the hotel hardships, extreme heat and humidity, mosquitoes,

flying roaches, splinters, blisters, fiberglass, and rain,

our youth prayed and worked together,

and they grew together.

In so doing, our youth reminded me that,

even though suffering is not divinely inspired,

our response to suffering must be.



Beloved, if Paul is calling us to boast in anything,

I believe he is calling us to boast in the truth that,

imperfect though we are,

together we can strive, like our youth,

to be perfectly compassionate.

Paul is calling us to boast that compassion is

the heart of the discipleship to which Jesus calls us in the Gospel:

a discipleship that inspires us

to respond to each other's needs and those of our neighbors,

to rely on God's provision,

to be vulnerable enough to offer love and receive it,

and to carry forth the work of healing and restoration

here in this place and out into the world.

If we make this our boast,

then the song we sing to one another, and the song others sing about us

will be the same song that Jacob Arkin

sang with *and to* Elaina Williams, a youth from St. Paul's:

“Because I knew you, I have been changed for good.”

Amen.