

*First Congregational UCC, Appleton*

*June 15, 2025*

*Romans 5:1-5, Boast & Glory*

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I never print my sermon manuscripts until the hour before worship begins. I tend to tinker on Sunday mornings. There's always a tweak here and a cut there. But I don't really believe in rewriting sermons as a reaction to the news. In twenty years of ministry, I've rarely jettisoned the whole thing and started over. I like to think the Holy Spirit is efficient and effective. Whatever inspiration I've received on Thursday shouldn't expire before Sunday. I also like to believe that the truth of the gospel is so consistent, and the beauty of the gospel is so transcendent, and the goodness of the gospel is so germane, that it moves like water into every vessel it enters. The good news of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ takes the shape of peace in times of strife, of hope when souls are threadbare, of comfort when hearts are broken, of joy when blessings abound. Yes, I believe in the call to preach and pray with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. But a pastor shouldn't operate like a frantic 24-hour news channel, reacting to every headline.

There have been a lot of headlines since Thursday. A friend messaged me the other day, running through the terrifying inventory of current crises and catastrophes, a list that keeps getting longer and darker. "The world as we knew it has totally ruptured," she wrote. This was before targeted political violence in Minnesota heightened the sense of fear and chaos in our already crumbling democracy.

The world as we knew it has totally ruptured. These are words of lamentation. They echo some of the bleakest passages of our sacred scriptures. After all, this isn't the first time the world has ruptured. More than 500 years before the birth of Christ, the City of Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. The people were taken into exile – ripped from their homeland and thrust into foreign land.

The Book of Lamentations portrays this rupture in vivid, excruciating detail:

My eyes fail from weeping,  
I am in torment within;

my heart is poured out on the ground  
because my people are destroyed,  
because children and infants faint  
in the streets of the city.

They say to their mothers,  
“Where is bread and wine?”  
as they faint like the wounded  
in the streets of the city,  
as their lives ebb away  
in their mothers’ arms.

What can I say for you?  
With what can I compare you,  
Daughter Jerusalem?  
To what can I liken you,  
that I may comfort you,  
Virgin Daughter Zion?  
Your wound is as deep as the sea.  
Who can heal you?”

The circumstances are different, but the torment is the same. Suffering is suffering. Devastation is devastation. A wound as deep as the sea is debilitating in any time and place. Since the prophet scribbled these words, we’ve sent explorers into the ocean. We’ve fathomed the depths. We know how deep the sea really is. Yes, it’s a hyperbole. But who can heal a wound so gaping?

Our nation, our world, is full of the wounded. Some are walking wounded, bearing afflictions invisible to the human eye. Some have slowed to a crawl, the weight of violence and injustice threatening to pull them under.

This week I watched a video of a woman who had reported for a scheduled US immigration court hearing. Her case was dropped, after which she was handcuffed, taken into the back of a truck, and placed in a metal cage with few openings for air and visibility. She was weeping, desperate to not be separated from her children. Her husband had tears streaming down his cheeks as he

explained they have six daughters at home – six little girls who did not know that their mother would not return. Who can heal them?

For some, the wounds are fatal. The news cycle has long since moved on from the dismantling of USAID, but a model developed by a Boston University mathematician estimates how many deaths are related to the funding freeze for HIV/AIDS relief. Since January, nearly 62,000 adults have died unnecessarily. As of this morning at 8:40am, approximately 6589 children have died, but that number increases by one every 31 minutes. These numbers are unfathomable. So are the numbers of children who have died in Gaza and Ukraine, lives ebbing away in their mothers' arms.

I do not wish to imagine what will unfold if the conflict between Israel and Iran does not abate.

Who can heal them? So many wounds as deep as the sea. A mariana trench filled with grief and fear and anger.

And today the church is given these words from Paul's letter to the Romans, words about peace with God through Jesus, words about boasting in the hope of the glory of God, words about glorying in our sufferings because they produce perseverance and therefore character and therefore hope. Words about God's love poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

It's true, at least sometimes, that what we go through can make us stronger. It's a biological process – to get bigger biceps you first have to work them enough to sustain tiny tears in the tissue, and the muscles increase through the process of repair. It can be a psychological process, too. Though we know the dangers of post-traumatic stress syndrome, psychologists have determined that some people experience post-traumatic *growth* - including such benefits as increased spiritual and emotional strength, heightened appreciation for the small things, and more empathy for others.

It's lovely that suffering can have this redeeming effect, but I wrestle with the contours of the teaching. I've had a bit of a shouting match with a biblical commentary on my shelf about this text. The author writes, "When we face problems, guess what! We can rejoice and say, 'Bring them on!' Paul takes the sting out of problems. He deflates them by saying that they are good for us."

I'm sorry, but that is baloney. Paul does not take the sting out of submarine canyons full of pain. It isn't unfaithful to be incapable of rejoicing when your world is turned upside down. We don't have to say "bring it on" when the world ruptures. We can say no. We can resist. In fact, I think that is truly what this passage is giving us: the language to reject the reign of death. To shout it from the mountaintops. Jesus suffered with and for us, sustaining his own wounds as deep as the sea.

Jesus suffers with and for every beloved child of God; not one is merely a number being added to a casualty counter every 31 minutes. Jesus suffered. And died. On a cross. The King of Heaven, crucified as a criminal. And then, despite the fact that it seemed like Jesus's mission was a total fail: surprise. An entirely different sort of rupture: from the worst suffering imaginable, God extracts salvation, building us a platform of grace to stand upon. Granting us assurance that suffering does not have the final say. Giving us the gift of the Holy Spirit, pouring love into our hearts and eternity into our souls.

I don't know if this is boasting in the hope of the glory of God, but I couldn't get out of bed in the morning without my faith in Jesus. I couldn't keep my heart free from hate if not for the Holy Spirit dousing it with love, like a well-watered houseplant. I couldn't handle the headlines if not for all the extraordinary ways ordinary people keep loving God and neighbor in ways that rarely make the news. Baking cookies for coffee hour, volunteering for hurricane relief efforts, praying for peace, contributing countless hours on church committees, hand-lettering signs for local protests, singing songs of praise.

In Jesus Christ, God crawled into the deepest valley with us. And so, we stand in grace, even when we cower in fear. We stand in grace, even when we collapse in despair. We stand in grace even when our suffering does not produce endurance and character and at long last hope, because ultimately what heals wounds as deep as the sea is not *our* suffering, but our suffering savior.

Thanks be to God.