

Will you pray with me please – May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you O God our Rock and our Redeemer.

In my time in the ministry I had the opportunity to travel to various places with youth and adults to work with the poorest of the poor, the most needy. For a few years I took youth to Atlanta and one of the places we always volunteered was what is now known as the Atlanta Mission, which is both a shelter and a soup kitchen, with facilities for 300, along with a super tough live in sobriety program.

Part of our time there we spent scrubbing toilets and halls, cooking and serving meals. And then it was required that we all attend a “meeting” somewhat like AA or NA taught by those who had successfully completed the sobriety program. Now these were not mock meeting for us and our kids, no these were the real thing attended by those men in the sobriety program. You can imagine these meetings with 20 or so men who were at the lowest point in their lives and here we were bringing in teenaged girls and boys from very affluent communities to sit across the aisle and listen to their stories, their tough and painful stories. Often times these men would try to tough love our kids, “don’t do what I did” kind of approach, in hopes of scaring our kids away from the evils of the world. But if the leader was experienced he would get the group to refocus on themselves, not the kids, and the tone of the meeting would change. Which I believe was more powerful for our kids than the touch love approach.

Now unlike other programs where we volunteered, in this program yes they worked the steps, one day at a time but ultimately the solution that they promoted in this program was simply “come to Jesus.” Come to Jesus on your knees, hat in your hands, heart broken open wide and bleeding, but come to Jesus. Now this was not a message that our youth and most of the adults had heard before so plainly and bluntly. And if that weren’t enough as the spirit moved in those meetings and trust me the spirit would move, the men would start to affirm the leader with colorful “amens” and “yes brother” and other expressions of affirmations of the message. This too was a new experience for us, this affirmation of the message....

In our New Testament lesson we find Paul explaining to the new church in Rome the nature of justification in Christ. Justify.

What does it mean - justify? Well basically it means to be forgiven on a grand scale – forgiven by Christ’s death on the cross. And this forgiveness cannot be earned, it is a gift. It was in Atlanta that I heard and saw the powerful message of justification, For these men in this program unearned forgiveness was a almost unbelievable gift well beyond what they could imagine. Perhaps they needed to hear the message again and again, and why they affirmed it over and over again.

In his letter this morning Paul told the believers in Rome that since we are justified by faith we have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ. We have been given these three gifts - forgiveness, faith and peace.

But there is more - Paul tells us that because of Jesus Christ we have access to grace in which we stand. Grace in which we stand. And because of this amazing grace we can boast or live – live with, live through, our sufferings....

And we know that it is through suffering (that no one is exempt from) it is through the suffering that we produce endurance and it is that endurance which produces character and that character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.

Why? Why are we not disappointed (or perhaps not often disappointed) by hope?

Because through hope God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. I believe our hearts are cracked open, cracked open so that God's love can be poured in.

This is challenging scripture, and I know perhaps not one that we often talk about but it is one that we can carry with us when change is among us. And it seems that change is always among us. Right now we have kids who are graduating, preparing to go off to a different school or college or other life adventures. Exciting for kids and for parents and perhaps also challenging for parents and for kids alike. We have experienced deaths of loved ones - friends, family members, parents. We are wading through end of life issues with others. Perhaps we are facing our own personal health issues. or supporting others as they are facing health issues. We are getting ready to release Kathleen, folks are moving and we are sad to say goodbye. And the list goes on. Change can be hard and challenging..

And here is this message from Paul to the believers in Rome two thousand years ago that can be just as timely to us today - about how we can work our way through challenges and what we can learn from challenges, how we can grow.

We are justified – forgiven on a grand scale. It's a gift, it's grace – and then we live our lives; lives that are not perfect. Because we are human we have difficulties, we have hurts and joys, successes and failures, and miracle of miracles God still loves us. And if that weren't enough, God sends people to love us and some times even to rescue us. God sends folks to us to crack us open and then pour in God's love.

Now I've thought about what learned theologians might have to say about this text but instead I'd like to share two stories about folks who for me have lived this passage, and have been the example of how we can be cracked open so that the Holy Spirit can be poured into our hearts.

It was a Sunday afternoon when my dad called me and asked me to take him to the hospital – the visiting nurse had come for my mom and discovered that my dad was jaundiced. After some testing it was discovered that my dad had end stage pancreatic cancer and that cancer was

basically everywhere. So together with the doctor we told my dad that he had three to six months to live.

My dad had always been the gentlemen and a gentle man, and I knew that he was a man of faith but I saw his faith in action that day, I saw how endurance produces character which produces hope. And my father's hope was his knowledge that heaven was in his future. My dad listened to the diagnoses, he thought for a minute, and said "thank you, I've had a great life, I'm good to go." He wasn't able to come home again. He lived for just 18 days more. He was gracious to all who came to see him and all who cared for him. He never complained or felt sorry for himself, or at least not to me. He modeled for me endurance through suffering, character and hope and ultimately God's love - poured into him. I saw such strength in him, it filled my heart. I too was cracked open to receive God's love.

Most recently I had one of those "God sent" people in the church where I served in Rhode Island. Her name was Sherry and she was a character and she had character. She was in her 70's. She had had an interesting and hard life. She talked about being a young girl and needing to be tough, talked about carrying a knife in her boot, for security. She left home at about 15, slept under peoples porches as it was safer for her than being at home. She told us about being in a gang, riding a motorcycle. Again, she was a character.

I am not remembering exactly how it happened but she ended up being taken in by the Salvation Army. She worked with them for many years; taught, preached, played the Tamborine, helped plant churches in Pennsylvania. Over her years with them the Army was her family.

When she left the Army she became an LPN and worked in nursing homes. She stopped riding the motorcycle but instead she took up skydiving! For real, I've seen the pictures.

I don't know how she found us but she came to our church on a Sunday morning and she affirmed the service by offering up an "Amen" to two, Oh my - I was certainly not prepared for that! I had been a member here for 20 years and had served other churches similar to ours and never had I experienced anyone speaking out during the worship service! No amen's ever!!! But it did remind me of my experiences at the Atlanta Mission.

In the years Sherry was with us, we learned to say "amen" when the spirit moved. We became a little more relaxed in worship and I learned to cherish those amens. She lived her love for God, in how she loved us, all of us. She was open to talking about her faith, her life, what she had learned and experienced and how over time God had climbed into the middle of everything she did.

Now I'll be honest, there were times when her spirit, her larger than life personality, could be challenging to me. But over time I saw that God had sent her to us and especially God had sent her to me so that I could learn from her.

At the end of her life Sherry's family was all gone, and we became her family, like the Salvation Army had all those years before. She too had cancer and was in a local nursing home and the good people of the church set up a plan such that she would never be alone. They did this on their own. That someone from the church would always be with her. They got permission, set up a schedule and someone was with her around the clock during the last days of her life. Families brought their young kids, they loved Sherry, people brought their dogs, Sherry loved dogs, people came before and after work, It was quite amazing. They were able to give back to Sherry what they had received from her. They shared with her God's love that she had so generously given to all of us.

I saw, we saw and we knew about the challenges that she had suffered through in her lifetime and how they produced endurance, character and hope.  
So - how do we go forward from here, what are we to do? We take what we **learn** in our peace and grace, suffering and endurance, hope and disappointment and we **hold** onto what we are **given** as we deal with the challenges of life

And then we need to pass it on, we need to do for others like it has been done for us. We pass on the love we've received, the gifts of the spirit, the lessons learned, we pass them on to those we love, we pass them on to the stranger because GOD'S LOVE – and that is in all caps - is not static.

I think often of those men in the Atlanta Mission, working so hard to conquer the demons in their lives, being able to be honest with a group of strangers about their addictions. I think of these men shouting out their affirmations for a life they desired, they shared their suffering, showed us their endurance, character and their hope for a relationship with Christ that would make them whole. And perhaps most importantly they allowed themselves to be cracked open to receive God's love.

The choir has a beautiful anthem for us this morning - titled Ever With Me. Some of the words may be familiar. I find the message of this anthem to be the part two of how we are to live into Paul's message this morning.

My friends, may our hearts be cracked open.

Amen

### **Romans 5:1-5**

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also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.

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### Words to the anthem

*Ever With Me*, by Gwyneth Walker: "O Lord, the Spirit of love abiding, the voice in the darkness guiding, hear my prayer. Be in my head, and in my understanding; be in my eyes, and in my looking; be in my mouth, and in my speaking; be in my heart, and always in my thinking. Lead me, Lord. Lead me in the paths of peace. Make your ways plain before my eyes. For it is only by your guidance, only by your tender love, that I may dwell in safety. God be in my head, and in my understanding. God be in my eyes, and in my looking. God be in my mouth, and in my speaking. God be in my life, and in my breathing. God be in my heart, and in my loving. God be in my thoughts, and in my doing. God be in my joy, and in my laughing. God be by my side, be my protector. God be at my end, and with me ever. (ever with me, ever with me, ever with me)."