

**“When in Doubt, Sing it Out”**  
**Romans 5:1-11**  
**Sermon Preached by Thomas P. Markey**  
**John Knox Presbyterian Church**  
**Indianapolis, Indiana**  
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This past November fifteen of our youth went on a retreat to Jameson Camp. This retreat – made possible through funds awarded to us through the Youth Ministry Grant Initiative, a program run by the Center for Congregations – was to serve as a time to create intentional space where the youth could spend time reflecting on both their individual and collective gifts, talents, and strengths. This was a fantastic opportunity for the youth to take a break from the stress and pressure of their busy, hectic schedules and take a moment to focus on themselves as people, exploring their sense of purpose, passion, and calling in their lives.

During our weekend retreat, we engaged in a multitude of activities.

We spent time relaxing with one another, enjoying each other’s company. We stayed up far past my bed time laughing, playing cards, and watching funny videos on our phones. We ate food – lots and lots of food. We indulged in a Western delicacy known as S’mores. Troy Judy and I drank far too much coffee and the youth consumed record breaking amounts of hot chocolate.

We took part in group building and teamwork exercises. We spent time engaging and exploring scripture. We took time to reflect and ask questions. We made space for devotional time. We worshipped together – singing, praying, and sharing communion.

While all of this time together was deeply impactful and wildly transformative, of particular significance to me, was our time spent together taking part in group building and teamwork exercises.

We had allotted three hours for these exercises, hoping to take time to learn about our individual giftedness and how that transferred to our collective community. For the most part, the first two exercises went as planned and were completed with little to no issue.

But, then we arrived at our third exercise.

We were each given a piece of PVC pipe that was approximately a foot long. The PVC pipe had been cut in half. The group was then given a marble and a bucket. We were told to place the bucket quite a far distance away. Then came our task. As a group, we had to transfer this one marble – using only our small pieces of PVC pipe – into the bucket. We were to stay in a single file line and the marble could not stop moving. If the marble stopped moving or if the

marble dropped to the ground, we had to start all over again. And so, with a foolish and naïve confidence, we began our task. The marble was let loose and, well, chaos, frenzy, and hysteria ensued. Frantically, we failed. And we failed again. And we failed again. And we failed again.

Each time the marble dropped, the bucket seemed to get farther and farther away. Sure, there were those few lucky moments when we got close, but more often than not, the marble dropped to the ground. And every time it dropped, we became more deflated and more defeated.

An hour into this exercise and it seemed as though we might never get that stupid marble into the stupid bucket.

Also, I forgot to mention that this was the first really cold weekend of the fall. After a week where we had seen beautiful and unseasonably warm temperatures, we were met with a weekend of bitter cold. Many of us were not appropriately dressed, so not only were mental exhausted, but our bodies began to shiver and our hands were turning numb as we tried so desperately to navigate that stupid marble into that stupid bucket.

Whether we knew it or not, Paul's words were certainly ringing true in the back of our minds - We certainly suffered. We endured, sort of. Our character was certainly tested. But, I'm not sure we felt any hope.

In all honesty, the most accurate way to describe our experience would be this - Suffering produces frustration. Frustration produces annoyance. Annoyance produces anger, exhaustion, and apathy.

Eventually, sensing our deep frustration, our group leader - a staff member from Jameson Camp - began to offer us reprieve. "I can move the bucket closer," she offered repeatedly. "How about we move on," she'd ask.

But the group, stubborn in our persistence to achieve this goal we had set out to accomplish, refused to take any sort of short cut and we were certainly not going to give up. Now, I'd love to tell you that at this point our persistence paid off and we were able to gain profound insight, knowledge, and wisdom about ourselves and our giftedness.

But, it was quite the opposite.

We continued to hem and haw and fuss and fight as the marble continued to fall to the ground over and over again. An hour and a half later and we were running out of time. Three hours was nearly up. We were cold. We were hungry. We were tired. We were done.

One-by-one we began to feel this sense of doubt overwhelm us - "You guys, maybe we should just move the bucket closer." "Hey, we've tried really hard, we should be proud of that." "There's nothing wrong with moving on and trying something different." "I'm sick of this! Can we be done?"

That's when - in the midst of our most deflated and most defeated moment - when we were feeling most pessimistic, something happened.

That's right, we broke out into song.

Rather spontaneously, recognizing that our group needed to step back and step away, our impromptu acapella offering provided us with a much needed sense of renewal and revitalization. "Let It Snow" became our rallying cry! It became our collective source of hope - a source of hope that, as Paul writes, "does not disappoint us."

And then, that's when it happened - with a newly energized sense of passion, desire, and focus - we got that marble into that bucket! We celebrated! We laughed! We danced! We cheered! And we - rather ceremoniously - threw those wretched pieces of PVC pipe to the ground and moved onto our next exercise.

You see, what I love about this story is the way in which it encapsulates so well - in a very honest and authentic way - our reading for today.

It is both easy and enticing to interpret Paul's words to us today as an individualized charge, an itemized instruction manual of how we might experience God's gift of grace through an appointment of hope. We tend to assume that Paul's words are an individual prescription for how we might faithfully cure the ailments of suffering.

But for those of us who have experienced any level of suffering, we know all too well that the movement from suffering to hope is not a direct line. The marble does not always go directly into the bucket. In fact, it often feels as though the marble rarely - if ever - finds its way to the bucket.

As one commentator writes, "[As followers] of the gospel, all we can do is bear witness to the messy, unpredictable, difficult, and daunting experience of tending people who suffer. We know the pilgrimage from suffering to hope is not linear and that suffering, endurance, and character are not bus stops that follow automatically. Each stage is a challenge in which we might dwell as witnesses to God's presence, even in God's apparent absence."<sup>1</sup>

Suffering is messy and chaotic.

Endurance is not always easily attained.

Character is not always carefully and quickly constructed.

Hope - or lack thereof - does sometimes feel like it is disappointing us.

So, then, what are we to do when it feels as though our marble continues to fall to the ground?

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<sup>1</sup> Laird J. Stuart, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2, "Romans 5:1-11," 90.

The answer is in the text.

Our hope - while gifted to us through the love and grace of God - is a hope we experience in, with, and through one another. Paul does not say "I" or "you" or "mine," he says "we" and "us" and "our."

We are justified.

We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom 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 boast in our sufferings...And hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

We can sort through the mess and the chaos together.

We can endure together.

We can craft a communal character together.

We can hug one another in a hope that does not disappoint.

Let It Snow. Let It Snow. Let It Snow. Thanks be to God. Amen.