

## KCYPUC | 8.3.26. | Rom 5:1-11 | International Women's Day and The Ministry of Reconciliation

Has anyone ever been to Fort St. John, BC? For those of you who do not know, my first vocation, my first mountain to climb, was as a touring singer-songwriter. On this day, on International Women's Day, I played this very northern, very working class, and very male dominated town in 2011. Fort St. John, like so many of our communities today, was quite polarized. To give you an idea as to how polarized this community was, I had two gigs there that day: the first, was an afternoon matinee at a strip bar; the second was an evening performance at a very liberal class, heavily politically left-leaning bookstore. The reason I had to perform at a strip club was interesting. Because the town was so male dominated, the only place for single women to meet men was at the strip bar (ironically, this less than cheerful venue was called *Cheers*). The thinking was, play the strip club in the afternoon, if for no other reason than to promote the evening gig at the bookstore. So, contrary to how things go in most strip clubs, the crowd was decidedly mixed, single men and single women. As for the bookstore gig: I had an audience of 25 or so people including the store owner, a hippie and Vietnam era war resister who turned his late 60s despair into devoting his life to his passion of alternative politics and spirituality and books. I counted 2 guys among this group—the rest were these beautiful, 35-60-something middle-aged women—most likely a bit lonely, single, well educated women starving for something cultural, something intellectual, something deeper, something artistic, something that may help make meaning of their lives—something/anything to counter the cruel practicality of the Fort St. John economy.

As you might imagine, there was little overlap in the audiences that day; most who saw me at the strip bar were not there at the bookstore, most at the bookstore were not interested in

the strip bar, or its clientele. That is to say, these women were enduring their Fort St. John fates. Whether it was their successes or failings or both that led them to Fort St. John, live music and local community in a wildly culturally subversive bookstore was a means to surviving their less than Edenic community. These were the suffering women of Fort St. John. But, as Paul writes in his letter to the Romans,

Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 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. (Rom 5:3b-5)

Suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint because it is God's love blowing through us by the Spirit's wind. If you would excuse a brief tangent: We should be careful here. Although, generally speaking, I do believe in the grace of redemptive suffering, we have all witnessed another kind of suffering: a suffering that degrades us. And this, to me, is one of the most mysterious realities in life: why some of us are enriched, ennobled by our sufferings, and why some of us are degraded, and dehumanized by our sufferings. Again, this is tangential to my purpose in this reflection, but I believe it is important to highlight: not all of us come out for the better for our sufferings.

Returning to Paul—who, by the way, did *not* go to Rome to deliver this epistle, arguably the most consequential letter written in the last two thousand years! Can you imagine the world today without Paul's Epistle to the Romans in which he lays out his theology most completely? Without this letter, there is a very good chance we have no Christianization of Rome—thus, no Martin Luther; thus, no Protestant Reformation—thus, no United Church of Canada. But here's a fascinating thing: Paul did not deliver his letter to the Romans in person, instead, he had his trusted patron, Phoebe, deliver the letter to the Romans. Again, a tangent, but one *absolutely*

worth highlighting on International Women's Day: Phoebe is the reason this most crucial of Paul's letters makes it into the ears and hearts of the Roman Jesus Movement, and perhaps why Romans makes it into the New Testament canon at all!

In ancient Rome, women were judged according to the honour of their husbands. Honour and status were often purchased by hosting social, political, or community events in their households. In the Roman world, when a man thought to be honourable died, his widow inherited his honour. This is how women like Lydia, Mary Magdalene, Chloe, and Phoebe were able to become patrons and hostesses of Paul's ministry, though I am sure not by design, this is how women became the unsung heroes of the Gospel message.<sup>1</sup> But let's return to Romans 5:1-11.

The reading may be divided into two obvious halves: the first half (1-5) and the second half (6-11). Remember our *Lectio Divina* earlier? The word that keeps resounding in my ears and heart in the first section is *endurance*; in the second half, *reconciliation*. Both are verbs, both are action words. This Lenten morning, I would like to consider how these two words of decisiveness and action relate to each other.

## I. Endurance

What are the words doing? Singing? Praising? Warning? Debating? Explaining? Reciting? Commanding? Yes, the words are explaining. But I hear both urgency and confidence in Paul's and Phoebe's voices.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard S. Ascough, *Lydia: Paul's Cosmopolitan Hostess, Paul's Social Network: Brothers and Sisters in Faith* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 66-67.

Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 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. (Rom 5:3b-5)

This is clear and forceful and precise Gospel logic: those who suffer for their neighbours, those who suffer for their communities will live to endure another day. Those who endure will be shaped in gospel character.<sup>2</sup> And those who are shaped in gospel character have hope. And this is kind of amazing, no? The logic that Paul is proposing to us here is as clear and simple as it is profound: that the way out of suffering, that the way out of despair and into hope is through community engagement, or engagement with or for others.

Every International Women's Day my mind goes back to those Fort St. John lone women who came out on a cold Wednesday night, to see a stranger perform his own unknown songs in a bookstore devoted to ecological activism, spirituality, vegan cook books, natural medicine, anti-colonial literature, anti-racism, alternative economies, anarchy writings, religion, and self-help—in a word, this bookstore and its curated little group were about: *revitalization*. I cannot tell you how out of place such a venue was in Fort St. John. And yet, there it was. At the time, I just assumed an old hippie—a 60s war resister, made it his life's vocation to resist even further: build a liberal class oasis in a desert of toxic masculinity, stolen Indigenous land, oil and gas industry—a desert of extractivism rather than stewardship. But now that I read Romans 5:1-11 I'm thinking something greater was at work here. No man is an island, and we are all interconnected

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<sup>2</sup> This "gospel logic" and "gospel character" was inspired by Walter Brueggemann. Walter Brueggemann, *The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann Vol. 3* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2020), 164.

with each other. Without each other we are nothing. Death may be the only thing that is truly ours and ours alone. This Fort St. John bookstore, this beautiful little haven of hope for humanity was made possible because the people transformed their despair, their loneliness, their sufferings to life-giving local culture, creativity, and hope. How did they do this? By *engaging* with each other. By putting one foot in front of the other, leaving their warm homes, and choosing atomic engagement with their community over digital despair on social media.

Now let's move on to the second half of today's reading.

## II. Reconciliation

**10** For if while we were enemies we were **reconciled** to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been **reconciled**, will we be saved by his life.

**11** But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received **reconciliation**. (Rom 10-11)

The word that stands out to me in this passage is reconciliation. The Greek word Paul uses is *katallagē*, from *katallassō*, meaning “to reconcile.”<sup>3</sup> Paul actually uses these words sparingly in the New Testament—*reconcile* appears only six times and *reconciliation* only five. The word itself combines *kata* (“down” or “against”) and *allassō* (“to change” or “to exchange”).<sup>4</sup> In other words, reconciliation implies an exchange between parties, reciprocity. This is crucial for understanding Paul's message. The gift of God's mercy and grace is reconciliation with God *through Christ*. In Romans and again in 2 Corinthians, Paul insists that this reconciliation is available *to all who choose* to live in Christ. But reconciliation is not merely

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<sup>3</sup> Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, second edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2014), 298.

<sup>4</sup> Bible Hub, “2644.”

something that once happened to us passively—it is something that continues to happen through us, actively, day by day.

In Romans, reconciliation is initiated by God. And, as the passage tells us, through Jesus “we have now received reconciliation.” But receiving is not passive. Receiving is participatory. Reconciliation, like hope, is a verb—an action. I love the idea of reconciliation and its active emphasis because it means *we* have a role to play.

Paul and Phoebe are revealing to us—and inviting us—into a relationship with God through Christ’s Word rather than a transaction. Our reconciliation with God calls for human participation—lives shaped by mercy, forgiveness, and trust. For me, this changes how I imagine God. God is not simply a ‘guy in the sky.’ God is not white either. And, on International Women’s Day, I would also like to challenge the outdated and heteronormative and patriarchal idea that God is physically well-abled or gendered at all! For me, God is the wellspring of mercy, the grace of forgiveness, God, for me, is the wellspring of mercy, the grace of forgiveness and trust. God is the space between ourselves and the strangers we help. God is in the silence of listening; yes, God *is* love—but I’ve always found that language over-used to the point of meaninglessness. Perhaps *God is the good faith attempt at reconciliation*. In any event, for me, God is not just a vertical relationship, God is very much an immanent, horizontal relationship. God is Emmanuel—God among us.

This is why Paul later speaks of a “ministry of reconciliation.”<sup>5</sup> Through Christ, the reconciliation of humanity with God is an event of cosmic significance. But it is also deeply

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<sup>5</sup> Calvin J. Roetzel, *2 Corinthians*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 78-80.

practical. It calls us to become active participants in healing what is broken—to repair relationships, rebuild community, and rediscover our connection with one another and with creation itself.

Paul’s advocacy for a “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18) is a distillation of his entire gospel message. Paul and Phoebe are urging us to understand that the reconciliation of humanity *to God through Christ*, is an event of “cosmic significance” and great “political import.”<sup>6</sup> We are obliged to participate in God’s Shalom.

### **Fort St. John Revisited**

So yes, every International Women’s Day my mind goes back to Fort St. John. I think those women in that Fort St. John bookstore understood something profound without ever naming it in theological language. In the midst of an often lonely cultural wasteland, of a politically polarized community, a place wherein Canada’s Original Sin of Indigenous injustice is obvious and on every street corner—amid such a place, they chose to show up for one another.

They chose community over isolation, conversation over despair, presence over resignation—and their engagement with their community transformed their sufferings into hope. And in that small act of gathering there was already a quiet ministry of reconciliation taking place. This is the mystery Paul speaks of in Romans: that God does not erase our suffering but transforms it. Reconciled to God through Christ’s Word, we are formed through suffering into Easter people of hope—people who participate in God’s reconciling work in the world. Every time we choose endurance over cynicism, community over division, and mercy over indifference, we become living signs that God’s love has indeed been poured into our hearts

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<sup>6</sup> Roetzl, 80.

through the Holy Spirit. God has poured love into our hearts—now the world is waiting to see what we will do with it.

So, let's conclude by moving from the cosmic to the concrete. Lent is a good time to ask ourselves: what is our role in the ministry of reconciliation? To what is our ministry of reconciliation devoted? How might we imitate Christ and embody this ministry of reconciliation? What relationships in your life are still governed by hostility? What part of creation is groaning because we have not yet participated in God's restoring exchange? Where is God inviting us to move from passive beneficiaries to active ambassadors? How might we imitate Christ and embody this ministry of reconciliation? I do not expect, nor even want you to leave thinking you can go home now and repair everything that's broken, every estranged relationship in your life. But what if we could leave this morning meditating on how endurance and reconciliation are Easter actions that lead to hope. That endurance and reconciliation engage God's wounded creation in a life-giving way. And let's try to remember Paul's moral calculus: that the way out of suffering, that the way out of despair and into hope is through community engagement, or engagement with or for others. Here's a thought: *We do not practice reconciliation because the world is easily fixed. We practice reconciliation because we have already been reconciled.*

### **A Prayer for Reconciliation<sup>7</sup>**

Where there is separation, there is pain. And where there is pain there is story. And where there is story, there is understanding, and misunderstanding, listening, and not listening. May we—separated peoples, estranged strangers, unfriended families, divided communities—turn toward each other, and turn toward our stories, with understanding and listening, with argument

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<sup>7</sup> Adapted from Pádraig Ó Tuama, "Midday Prayer," *Daily Prayer with the Corrymeela Community* (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2017), 45.

and acceptance, with challenge, change and consolation. Because if God is to be found, God will be found in the space between. Amen.