

Mike Bennett
First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
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John 16.12-15
Romans 5.1-5

Character Development

...suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope...—Romans 5.3-4

I have a fondness for novels that narrate events over an extended course of years. A good novelist can make an interesting story out of the lives of even the most unexceptional characters—simply by giving them enough time and attention. A couple of my all favorites are Ann Tyler and Gail Godwin, whose novels *Saint Maybe* and *Father Melancholy's Daughter* are among the best I've ever read. Both novels cover a span of twenty to thirty years, chronicling the events in the lives of two, fairly ordinary, families.

Saint Maybe follows Ian Bedloe (who has made his way into sermons before) and his extended family for a generation—through the tragic death of his older brother, the raising of his brother's children and the ordinary human trials in everything from childhood, to adolescence, to old age. *Father Melancholy's Daughter* is told from the perspective of the daughter of an Episcopal priest. The book begins when she is six years old and ends when she is in graduate school.

What makes these novels so special is the skill that Tyler and Godwin have in the art of character development. They have a knack for helping the reader to come to know and understand the characters in the books. This is true from the major characters right down to the bit players. In *Saint Maybe*, we get to know the different people who live in the Bedloe's neighborhood. In *Father Melancholy's Daughter*, the author lovingly describes the foibles of the various officers and leaders in the Episcopal Church where the main character's father serves as priest. (Some of the descriptions of church meetings and church politics alternately left me in stitches and in tears!)

In both of these books, the character development is largely dependent upon the pain and suffering that the central characters undergo. They are normal people. They are not war heroes

or Christian martyrs. And yet, their lives are full of very difficult and painful realities. The Bedloe family survives the untimely death of two young people and the challenges of raising their children. The daughter in *Father Melancholy's Daughter* must grieve the loss of her mother and learns to find her own identity outside of her father's chronic and frequent bouts with depression. The characters develop most forcefully—and most beautifully—in the midst of their pain.

According to the New Testament, real-life “character development” comes about in much the same way. The Bible isn't talking about literary theory, of course, but rather about the development of character in Christians. The fifth chapter of the letter to the Romans gives us vitally important information that helps us to understand the process for becoming Christians of real substance, for developing character. Interestingly enough, it is often the same things that help fictional people develop *as characters* that also help us *develop character*. In both cases, pain and suffering can be the raw material of character development.

The letter to the Romans describes character development as a process with three stages: “...suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope...” (Romans 5.3-4) Through our suffering, we learn to endure. Through our endurance, we develop character. Through our character we can begin to live hopeful lives—even in the presence of pain and suffering.

Now, I suppose if I were the Apostle Paul, I might have written the passage a bit differently: suffering *can* produce endurance, and endurance *can* produce character, and character *can* produce hope. For it seems to me that the process is far less than automatic. We have choices about what happens in our lives. Painful events or circumstances are often beyond our control, but we have choices about the meaning those events come to have and the ways we allow them to shape us. On a cynical day, I might recast Paul's verse like this: suffering produces anger, and anger produces bitterness, and bitterness produces hopelessness. Harsh words, to be sure, but I've certainly seen it go that way just as often as I've seen it go Paul's way.

My point is this. Paul is not describing an automatic human process. He is describing the fruits of the Christian life. By immersing ourselves in the Christian story and seeking a

relationship with Jesus, we have access to a kind of character development that would otherwise be unavailable to us. The one who redeemed the world by suffering on a cross can help us to redeem the suffering in our lives. It is not an easy or cheerful path to follow, but it is a path that can bring depth and meaning to otherwise senseless lives. In other words, it is a path that allows us to develop character.

The lessons of Romans 5 can be applied in virtually any arena of our life. Certainly not all suffering is redemptive by nature, and we must be certain not to exalt suffering to the point that we lose sight of justice. Battered spouses, for example, are not to be counseled to continue being battered so as to develop more character. But most suffering, to some extent, *can* be the occasion for character development. In our relationships, in our work, in our educational endeavors—in all arenas of life, suffering and pain can be powerful teachers.

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher (and another frequent sermon visitor), writes about the importance of struggle and suffering within marriage. In a wonderful essay from 1843, he suggests that those couples who have an “easy” marriage are really being cheated out of the opportunity for growth:

Well, then, O childish one, who knows not the peril of the spirit, suppose the marriage is fortunate, that here is a marriage that life coddles, and fortune smiles upon continuously—what then? Then this childish marriage has lost the best, for the resolution itself is the best. It is not a wretched invention against the misery of life, but the garment of salvation... (“Love Conquers All (On The Occasion Of A Wedding”))

Kierkegaard and Paul both, I think, get at the heart of the mystery of the Christian faith. Look at that cross in front of you. That is a symbol of suffering. And yet, it is also our symbol of salvation. The two things are deeply related and are finally resolved only in the presence and power of our Savior. We will know the final end of suffering when we feast together in the Kingdom of God. Today we have a foretaste of that feast. In the meantime, we need to pay

attention to the pain in our lives and seek to follow the path that leads from suffering to endurance to character to hope.