

## **GRATEFUL FOR HARD LESSONS**

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

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This is Stephen Colbert, comedian and TV talk show host; he took over as host of the Late Show this fall after David Letterman retired. Colbert is hugely popular and he loves what he does. He finds, in fact, deep meaning in bringing laughter and comedy to the world. After one night's show, he said to a reporter, "That was true joy; that was the joy machine." He has a quotation taped to his computer which says, "Joy is the most infallible sign of the existence of God."

There is a backstory to all people, which is just a way of saying that we all have a story. There are events in our lives which have made us who and what we are. The stories of our lives shape us.

So who is this comedian who has a quote from a French theologian on his computer? Stephen is the youngest of eleven children. He was raised in a deeply Catholic intellectual family; his father was the dean of several medical schools. When Stephen was ten years old, two of his brothers – the two who were closest to him in age – died in a plane crash along with their father. All of the other living siblings were living on their own by then, so the rest of his childhood and adolescence was spent with his mother.

Recently Stephen Colbert sat down for a long interview with a reporter, who asked him, "How is it that you have emerged from that childhood tragedy so grounded and so joyful?" Colbert's answer: two words. "My mother." He goes on to say this: "The world is so beautiful. I'm very grateful to be alive, even though I've known a lot of loss. And I know that I am here to know God, to serve God, to love God. I got that from my siblings, from my dad, and from my mom.

Because of my mother's example, I am not bitter. Because she was not bitter. Broken, yes. Bitter, no. Even in those days of grief, she taught me that sorrow is inseparable from joy, and that we have to learn to accept that suffering is a part of life. Here's the thing that most people don't

understand, but it's deeply true for me. I have learned to love the thing that I most wish had not happened. I have learned to love the thing that I most wish had not happened.

We can learn from everything that happens to us. And we can either hate parts of our lives or be grateful for everything, even the events that have caused us such pain.”

Someone who believes in joy – someone who has made a career of joy – finds that one of the roots of joy is acceptance that life involves pain and suffering. That deep acceptance has led to deep joy.

Being grateful for hard things: this is a hard thing to talk about. Let me say right up front that this is an area ripe for misunderstanding. So I want to be clear about what the Bible says and doesn't say, and about what my theological and biblical training has led me to believe. God does not cause bad things to happen. God doesn't cause bad things to happen to punish people, and God doesn't cause bad things to happen to teach people lessons. The essence of God is love, so it is out of character for a God whose being is love to cause bad things to happen.

I hear many people say, “Everything happens for a reason,” and I know that saying is sometimes comforting. But it's not a quote from the Bible, and I would like to caution people about using it. Because when people who are suffering hear that phrase, “Everything happens for a reason,” they think, “Why am I being punished?” And sometimes they think, “Why is God doing this to me?” So you see that what is intended as a way of understanding or helping can actually lead to greater pain.

What the Bible does say, and what I do believe, is that God is with us in all times, that God does not abandon us, and that we can learn and grow through times of difficulty and challenge.

A woman named Elizabeth Hagan is an ordained American Baptist minister. She wrote this just this week.

“A couple of years ago, I found myself in one pretty difficult season. I was unable to be paid or credited for work I had completed, I was forced to undergo emergency surgery that led to post-

surgical complications, I was living in a new place where I had only one friend other than my husband...and, on top of all that, I was watching a dear friend in a faraway place face a life-threatening harassment situation. I was focused on nothing but survival and whining. I couldn't wait for things to get better and for life to return to normal.

But let me tell you what I learned. There was no normal. And I would not return to it.

Instead, I could be re-made. I could see the world and my vocation differently. I could claim life as good even when it wasn't from all outside appearances. I could gaze upon God in places full of such unexpected joy.

I bore new scars, yes. I could tell new stories of horrors, yes. And, I will probably always move through life with deeper caution, yes. But as I look back on all the terrors of that summer, and where I stand today, I can honestly say I am grateful. I'm grateful not just because I survived. Or because my body healed.

I am grateful because this difficult time gave me eyes to see my abundance. My heart has softened towards those who face unexpected illnesses. My vocation has found clarity and re-definition in ways that feel more like me.

This is what I know: you and I are living in a human community of rich provisions. Let's stop just making it to another day. Or checking the hard stuff off our list. That survival mentality will get us nowhere interesting. Instead, I'm learning to claim the good and thrive. I'm learning to live in this hard and beautiful world God has given us, where there are so many wonders to behold."

What do we learn from life's most difficult moments? Peter Marty is a Lutheran pastor in Davenport, Iowa. In 2013, his 54-year-old healthy athletic wife collapsed on the kitchen floor in her tennis outfit. She would not leave the University of Iowa hospital for the next fifty days and she remembers none of it. She survived three risky brain surgeries, one serious relapse, and electric

shock therapy. Now, 18 months later, she has been released from the care of her doctors and is free to resume normal living. But, of course, life is no longer normal. “Many mornings”, her husband writes, “Susan and I find ourselves waking up to the same curious ritual. I turn from my pillow to hers and say almost instinctively, ‘I can’t believe you’re alive,’ and she whispers back, ‘I can’t believe it either.’ Then we rise, and go about our day, trying to live as gratefully as possible, treating life as a gift to be shared.”

None of us go through life without a few hard lessons. What have you learned from yours? What have you learned from getting laid off? What did you learn from constructive criticism? Many people say they learn more from failure than success; the lessons are there if we pay attention. What have you learned from your mistakes?

Have your challenging times made you wiser, more empathetic? Can you look back on obstacles you conquered and feel grateful? Even the hardest, most heart-wrenching experiences, that you never ever would choose – they can lead us right into the heart of God. As Paul puts it in our passage for today, “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...”

We all have stories; we are all shaped by the things that happen to us. But we are not helpless victims. We can choose how our stories end, and we can choose how we will tell them. We can tell them as martyrs or we can use our stories to make us wiser, more empathetic, and more helpful.

Last May, I attended a preaching conference in Denver. One evening a singer-songwriter named Carrie Newcomer performed for our group; she sang a song called “You Can Do This Hard Thing.” Listen to it and hear what God might be saying to you, through this song, and through the difficult moments of your life.