

Everybody has to put up with suffering, whether you are a child or an adult. If children want good grades in school, they have to study more and play less. If they want to perform well in sports, they have to drill boring exercises. If they want to please their parents, they have to do chores at home. As they say in the workout room: “No pain, no gain.” If you don’t tear down a muscle, you can’t build it up.

Adults experience suffering on a different level, often associated with loss. As we grow older, we lose physical abilities. If we’ve experienced the joy of love, we’ve known the pain of rejection. If you’ve ever lost a job or lost a child, you know severe anguish. As the end of life comes into focus, adults may find their options more limited. They used to believe, as children learn, that pain leads to gain. But for many people growing older, pain just seems to lead to more pain.

In today’s passage from the Letter to the Romans, though, Paul affirms that pain leads to gain. When you suffer affliction, he says, it produces endurance; it prepares you to handle more. Endurance, he says, produces character; we become people who can handle adversity. And character, he says, produces hope. In the past, when afflictions came, they produced character. When more afflictions come, they produce hope that good will follow. This is not a mindless hope, Paul says. This is hope that does not disappoint. This is hope that will come true. He explains the reason this way: “the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” The Holy Spirit is God’s greatest gift. We received the Spirit at our baptism and confirmation, and that Spirit is our pledge for eternal life. All the suffering we endure, all the affliction we suffer, only leads us closer to the day when we will pass from this life into eternity. Some people look on death as the ultimate affliction, but to Paul it is nothing but a rest stop on the highway of hope, a hope that leads to eternal life.

Listen to Paul again: “We even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint.”

We hear this passage today, Trinity Sunday, because it mentions all three persons of the Trinity. Paul says we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, and that the Holy Spirit has been poured out into our hearts. We believe in one God, three persons. We also believe that this God does something. God loves us and helps us through the pain of suffering into the gain of heaven.