In the middle ages, there were over a thousand free-standing crosses on the isle of Iona, Scotland. Iona is only one mile wide and four miles long but still, a thousand crosses graced the land, marking it as a holy space. These days, there are only three free-standing crosses, called the high crosses. One of those crosses, MacLean’s, is on the cover of our bulletin this morning.

Take a close look at the center of that cross - the point at which the two bars meet. This 15th century masterpiece displays the center of our own faith and thus, the starting point and the point by which all else comes and goes - the crucifixion. MacLean’s Cross stands tall not in a random field or by a crumbling chapel but at a crossroads.

See, pilgrims and disciples have been coming to Iona since the year 563. Since then, lest the gaps created by Viking raids and violence, Christians have found their life of faith deepened by the sacred travel the isle provides. Pilgrims and disciples walk the land, paths trod by those who came before them. In the Middle Ages, people would have stopped here at MacLean’s Cross, a wayside prayer-cross, on their way to worship at either the monastery or the nunnery, on their way to a funeral, and on the way to the bakehouse. It was the first stop for pilgrims coming up from the shore and it was the point by which pilgrims found their way into deeper discipleship - worship, lamentation, fellowship over food. All from the place of Christ’s crucifixion, the place where God’s love poured out.

The pastor and writer Eugene Peterson wrote that “there are two biblical designations for people of faith that are extremely useful: disciple and pilgrim. Disciple says we are people who spend our lives apprenticed to our master, Jesus Christ. We are in a growing-learning relationship, always. A disciple is a learner, but not in the academic setting of a schoolroom, rather at the work site of a craftsman. We do not acquire information about God but skills in faith. Pilgrim tells us we are people who spend our lives going someplace, going to God, and whose path for getting there is the way, Jesus Christ. We realize that ‘this world is not my home’ and set out for ‘the Father’s house.’ Abraham, who ‘went out,’ is our archetype. Jesus, answering Thomas’s question, ‘Master, we have no ideas where you are going. How do you expect us to know the road?’ gives us directions: ‘I am the Road, also the Truth, also the Life. No one gets to the Father apart from me.’”

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Disciple and pilgrim, bound together, the interior and the exterior, the path inward and the path set out before us. Paul knows what path the journey of faith can wind. His collection of letters gift us with an interior monologue, a constant working out of his wrestling and proclamation of the One alone he worships and serves. Such is true in Romans chapter 5, too. It is thought that Paul dictated his letters to an amanuensis or a literary assistant, hence the building of an idea through a quickening step. Hear the opening verses again and imagine Paul pacing and working through his understanding of God’s outrageous love:

*Therefore, since we are justified by faith, 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 also boast in our sufferings, knowing that 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.*

Suffering produces endurance...  
Endurance produces character...  
Character produces hope...  
A path laid out to come to the foot of the cross and glimpse the glory of God’s love poured into our very hearts.

A path laid for us but also a path that has been used *not* for the glory of God’s love but to wield Holy Word as a switch and sword. I must be clear here and so shall we all be: when Paul speaks of suffering, of suffering as a step towards understanding God’s love, Paul is not giving a free pass for people of faith to *cause* suffering. There is no justification for ill and immoral actions as a means by which another can be taught what endurance, character, and hope can be. There never has been. There never will be.

And likewise, when Paul speaks of suffering Paul is reminding us that it does not come as punishment. It does not come because God is displeased with us. Paul is reminding us that God’s love pours out and therefore, God does not, will not, cannot create suffering so we learn what Christ’s suffering was like. Christ’s experience of suffering means that there is nothing - not life, not death, not anything else in all creation - that we can experience where God cannot meet us and where God has not gone before and where God cannot provide a path forward.

Paul speaks of suffering to remind us of the One who came before us to suffer the cross. On the heels of Paul’s path towards understanding, he says, “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” That is the suffering the informs our suffering. Christ has stood in the depth of all manner of pain and hurt, of betrayal and denial, of persecution and *ye of death* for our sake. There is no suffering we can endure wherein Christ has not gone before us, gone into, and - and -
risen victoriously from. The cross, the darkness of the day between, and the empty tomb reveal to us the ultimate suffering that produces endurance that produces character that produces hope. Hope that does not disappoint us.

Life can be fragile and fractured. It can produce hardship and stretches us beyond what we imagined ourselves capable. To follow in the way of Jesus the Christ - to be a disciple and a pilgrim - is to **guarantee** that the kind of suffering Paul describes will come to pass because it means we are going in the way of one who turned the world upside down. The One who spoke truth to power. The One who drew near to those cast aside. The One who said “no” to the status quo. That is not an easy path. But it is the path we sojourn when we say “yes” and “here I am” and “speak Lord, for your servant is listening.”

I am not an athlete but I do know that the strain of using one’s muscles and pushing them to their greatest extent is painful. And it hurts the next day and maybe the day after. But then, when you get up and try to do what you did the day prior, your can go a little further than before, a little deeper, a little more assuredly. You develop **endurance**. That endurance gives you a new chisel in the sculpting of your character because you have traversed and trialed and come to the other side. And that character - when developed by ways of humble faith, ways that give the glory to One it is due - then that character is full of unbounded hope. Hope that wakes you the next morning and says: let’s do it **again**.

Pilgrims and disciples and all manner of folks in between - we are ever at a crossroads, coming to and walking from places of pain and suffering, of hope and joy. What matters is where you look when you come to the crossroads - will you look down, at your own two feet or at the feet of your neighbor? Will you scan the road ahead for danger or will you look behind you, beholden to what was? Or will you remember to look up and imagine yourself at the feet of MacLean’s Cross? Will you look at that which is to guide you - a cross that within its very center stands as the sole reminder of God’s love poured out for us. A love that is ever before us, ever within us, a love that we did nothing to deserve but a love that demands our all. May it be so. Amen.