This is graduation season. A time when hundreds of thousands of graduates – including our own - will hear commencement speakers urging them to build the kind of character such as we find in the men and women who built our country. The honesty of George Washington who chopped down the cherry tree. Young Lincoln who walked miles to correct an insignificant error of accounting. Jane Addams, the founder of Hull House. Nathan Hale, who regretted he had but one life to give for his country. The political men of character John Kennedy wrote about in Profiles in Courage.

CHARACTER. Something we value, a trait we respect. What parents and teachers hope to instill in our children. An attribute we associate with religious faith.

It may surprise you to learn that character per se is discussed in the Bible only once, in our text from Rom 5, where Paul writes "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope..."

Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope..." This is often taken to mean God allows us to suffer to "build our character". To test our faith. To make us "stronger" in our faith. How often have we heard we suffer because God somehow thinks it is "good" for us?

I don't think that is Paul's point at all. Paul is simply acknowledging that we DO INDEED SUFFER, and that suffering has an effect: hardening, greater resistance to pain. Greater strength. More endurance. God does not cause us to suffer "for our own good". Suffering is simply part of life. And suffering produces endurance.

Every athlete knows this truth: not only does practice makes perfect, but in sports, literally, "no pain, no gain": enduring suffering makes one stronger. Suffering produces endurance.

Tragically, for some people, suffering hardens only their hearts, not their capacity for pain. For some, suffering leads to bitterness towards God and other people. Suffering OUGHT to make us more sensitive to others' pain. But for some people, suffering only makes them cold and callous to the misfortunes of others.

Paul wrote these words on suffering and endurance late in his life - after years of much pain, disappointment, suffering, persecution, imprisonment, and hardship. It was only then that having gone through it all, Paul, from the vantage point of his mature faith, was able to look back and gauge that his suffering had been worthwhile. It had made him
more sensitive than he might have been. His suffering gave him a strength he would not have had otherwise.

So for Paul, suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character: Character is not built overnight. It takes time and experience to develop character. Men and women of character are made, not born. For many of us, it takes a lifetime to build a life of character.

And if we have too few people of character today, perhaps it is because too few of us are willing to BUILD our endurance through suffering. Endurance is "out" and quick gratification is "in".

I realize how dangerous (maybe even crazy) it is to say, "you need to suffer more." And I certainly don't mean, live with a toothache, sleep on a bed of nails, or continue in an abusive relationship. But I do mean to repudiate the mentality that says, "Give me what I want and give it to me NOW." Or, "PLAY now, PAY later". Or the fantasy that we can have the kind of community or nation we want at no cost. Or that it is OK to have a free lunch at someone else's expense. Suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character.

Cy Young is revered as perhaps the greatest professional baseball pitcher ever - he certainly won the most games. One reason he was baseball's winningest pitcher was his ability. The other reason was in Cy Young's day, there were no relief pitchers to bail him out when the going got rough: he had to hang in there and endure the "shelling" - and pitch his way out of a jam. And he learned to do it.

I believe the abundance of "relief pitchers" available to us - medical, therapeutic, social, and financial - inhibit the development of character. We are constantly tempted to grab a quick fix rather than enduring a more painful long-term solution. But building character takes time. As the ancient historian Plutarch said, "Character is simply habit long continued."

Paul writes, suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces HOPE. A person of character acts WITH hope, hope that the good news of Christ really is good news, hope that God's kingdom IS coming, hope that new life and new opportunities are available. Character produces hope not just for SELF - but also hope for OTHERS.

A little girl overheard her wealthy father praying for a destitute neighbor. When the prayer was over the daughter asked her father, "Daddy, why trouble God with that? YOU can give our neighbor what he needs." (LH 1:7:27)

People of character DO GOOD things. That's how we know they HAVE character. People of character are bold to do the RIGHT thing, even if it is not convenient, even when it is not popular. Men and women of character place the interests of ALL above their own self-interest.
Although the word character is only mentioned one specific time in the Bible, the Bible is filled with persons OF CHARACTER. Two of them appear in that parable we know so well, the parable of the prodigal son and the gracious father. And each of them endured suffering in building their character.

You might not think of the PRODIGAL SON as a person of character. After all, it was a LACK of character that got him into trouble in the first place. I imagine he wanted for nothing as a child – his father was both wealthy and generous. Maybe TOO generous. You know the story. He asks for his share of his inheritance, the father gives, and off he goes to find his fame and fortune. What he finds instead is that his money wasn’t going last forever. It didn’t last long at all. He finds himself in the sewer dreaming of home, remembering the generosity of his father. There in the depths of despair, with only the pigs for companions, those worthy and lasting values of his father are awakened. The prodigal resolves to go home and beg forgiveness. And at last the seeds of character planted by his father take root and begin to bear fruit.

The parable is most often named for the prodigal, but it is the FATHER who is the central character, the central character of character. Like the prodigal, the father made his share of mistakes. He was a loving and gracious father, but he was not perfect. Perhaps he indulged his children to the point of excess. In a sense the Father is a tragic figure, alienated from one son at the beginning of the story and from the other at the end. For sure he endured the sufferings and perplexities of parenthood.

The FATHER is the same gracious and loving father at the parable’s beginning and ending. But I also think that like his younger son, and unlike his older son, he grew through his experience. There are still some loose ends at the end of the parable, but the gracious father is ready and eager to resume a loving relationship with BOTH of his sons. He was and remained a loving, accepting, forgiving, and gracious father, ready and eager to give his children what they needed for life. He was and remained a man of character.

For Jesus, suffering, endurance, character and hope are all bundled together in one word: COMPASSION. Jesus was filled with compassion for persons in need. Jesus endured human suffering so that human suffering might be endured. Jesus brought hope to those without hope. And in calling his disciples to live with compassion, that hope continues. In persons of character, that hope abounds. For the hope God gives in Jesus Christ does not fail.

In the parable of the prodigal, while the boy is still far off, the father runs to greet him and welcome him home. Why? Because he was filled with compassion. Just like the Good Samaritan was filled with compassion for the beaten man in the ditch, so also the gracious father was filled with compassion when he saw his prodigal son coming home. Filled with compassion – touched in the heart and actively responding with the hands. Filled with compassion. That is the essence of Christian character.
Friends: Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and that hope does not fail, because God's compassionate love has been poured into our hearts. AMEN.

Luke 15: 11-24
11 Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. 13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17 But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' 20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21 Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

Romans 5:1-5
1 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 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. 3 And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 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.