

“The Struggle Towards Renewal”

We are now in the heat of summer. One thing I always enjoyed as a child during this time of year was going to the pool at the YMCA. My mother made sure we learned how to swim by the time we were 8 years old. Swimming was fun and refreshing. Sometimes, though, I would get a cut. The lifeguard in the office applied a Band-Aid and back in the water I jumped or dived. Chlorine and Band-Aid adhesive worked together, and soon the Band-Aid was gone.

In looking at our scripture today from Romans 8:18-39, the Rev. Gary Simpson, leading pastor of the Concord Baptist Church of Christ in Brooklyn, New York, writes that we need something deeper, more lasting, than a Band-Aid. Instead of applying scripture, we need to embody it. Application seems so limited; it may only involve the wounded area itself. Embodiment is a more holistic and full-body experience of scriptural encounter. As Rev. Simpson points out, as a preacher he does not want people to apply the sermon to their lives. He wants the sermon to become part of their living.

Our central verse today, “All things work together for the good of those who love the Lord, who are called according to God’s purposes” is one of those application verses. This is a text I often use during funerals to comfort families. It is often used to try to make sense out of bad situations. But let us be clear, the

verse does not read, “All things work together so that Christians have no problems and no struggles.” That’s not what it says. The whole text today presumes there will be struggle and difficulties in life even after one is justified by faith and begins to live the Christian life.

Can we agree that there are some bad things that do happen in which God is not lining up the universe for our good? What happens when the faithful are working at cross purposes even though we claim to be called? In today’s political world in the United States, it often seems Christians are working against other, depending on how they interpret the Bible and how they see the relationship between politics and the Christian witness. Romans 8:28 tries to hold the tension between two inevitable truths. On the one hand, bad things---awful things---will happen. On the other hand, the faith asserts that God is always active and the faithful presume this means God is active for us and in us.

Life is hard. It is often frustrating, sometimes unbearable. In v. 35 Paul mentions harassment, famine, nakedness, danger, the sword. In what we are living through today, we could add coronavirus, pandemic, racial prejudice, stress. Yet Paul goes from this daily assault on life to the assertion in the next verse that “we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” How is this?

We have to look at the salvation story. When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, they lost the glory that was intended for them. Until Jesus died for us, we were held in bondage to sin and death. But this bondage did not just affect human beings. The whole creation, sun, moon, sky, birds, animals, plants are in bondage, in slavery. Nature did not rebel, but it has been subjected to corruption and decay. This explains theologically why sickness, suffering, death occur in nature.

The good news is that what the human race was designed for in the beginning but was lost has been regained through the Messiah Jesus Christ in the resurrection. As the church, we are now between the resurrection and the second coming of Christ, at which time all in Christ will be glorified and will receive the full life and body and world intended by God. Paul draws upon the great woes that would come upon the world in order for the new world to be born.

Paul uses the image of the labor pains of birth to illustrate the struggles which must come and to explain that while things may be painful in the interim, Christians can nevertheless be confident of God's final victory and their final redemption. Although modern day drugs and technology can lessen the pain of childbirth, the labor of having a baby can still be a struggle for a mother. Paul's use of "groaning in labor pains" still applies and helps us understand this passage.

There may be struggles in the present age but birth speaks of a new life that is at the same time the mother's life, delighting her with a fresh fulfillment, despite the pains of labor. Paul can declare that the present "groaning," though at one level a sign of the not fully redeemed state, is at the same time a sign of the Christian's sure and certain hope. There will be a final redemption of the body. Like a mother, who after the struggles of childbirth glories in the beauty of her new child, Christians celebrate in the glory they receive at Christ's second coming.

In that glory, creation will also have freedom because God's children have glory; their glory will consist quite perfectly in this, that they will be God's agents in bringing the cure, the restorative divine justice to the whole created order. The Christian shall be "conformed into the image of God's son provided that we suffer with him so we might also be justified in him."

God intends that redeemed human beings shall be the agents throughout the cosmos that still groans to be set free. While we are justified by faith and not by works, we are God's agents in helping transform the world. We are to bring the image of Christ into the world, bringing the healing, freedom and life the world longs for. We are to work towards the liberation of creation from the injustice, misery, bondage, corruption, and death that at present put a claim on the broken world.

“All things work together for the good of those who love the Lord,” We do what we do because we love God. Those in the Spirit love God from the heart. We cannot keep the law; we live and act because we have a familial love of God.

And we are called according to God’s purpose. We should never be complacent in believing we can just sit around and wait for Christ’s return. Some Christians take the attitude that they do not need to do anything about doing justice or protecting the environment now. But that’s not supported by this passage. The passage clearly speaks to Christians taking action to do God’s work now and being involved in struggles to achieve God’s redemptive power now. We are called to do God’s restorative work now, not just wait for God to do all the work. Think in these terms. In the Hebrew Bible text, when God speaks of building the new Temple, the Temple will not magically just appear one day. It is built by human architects and stonemasons. Just as Abraham, Jacob and the other patriarchs and matriarchs did God’s work, we do God’s work.

When we do work to transform the world and make it a better place, struggle and suffering can and usually will occur. Think of the early church. Converts had to meet in secret. The practice of Christianity was illegal until Emperor Constantine legalized the faith in 316 AD. People could be imprisoned or killed for their faith.

And these struggles continue until today. In 1998 Westminster Abby in London commissioned a group of statues to fill the vacant niches on its West Front with 20th century Christian martyrs. There was no shortage of candidates. I have seen these statues. They include Martin Luther King, Jr. and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the young German theologian who stood up to Hitler, was involved in a plot to kill Hitler, and was eventually hung. Today, one can be imprisoned or killed for being a Christian. The situation is especially troubling in Nigeria, where this year 1200 Christians have been killed for their faith . When I was in seminary in 2011, one of my fellow students barely managed to get refuge status to get out of Pakistan and save his life. He had converted several friends to Christianity and then had a price put on his head for his faith.

We cannot apply Band-Aids to the brokenness of creation. Wholeness and continued connection to the creator demand that we look for long-term sustainable solutions to our problems. As Rev. Simpson writes, we take solace and comfort not in a belief that God has it all planned out or wills us to trials and tragedies, but in the promise that God is with us all the time. We cannot be separated from the love of God. Unfortunately, sometime that is all we get. Thankfully, it is all we need.

As we move towards full redemption, it is not so because we simply say that it is. It is so because it becomes embodied in us.