

Genesis 50:15-20
Romans 8:18-30

Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
September 24, 2017

For Goodness' Sake!

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

Our reading today from the closing chapter of Genesis recalls how Joseph forgave his brothers, who in anger years ago had thrown him into a pit to get rid of him. But God was at work to transform this act of evil into good. Joseph is reconciled to his brothers, food is provided to the people of Israel so that many are kept alive, and God's covenantal promise to Abraham is carried forward. Listen to these words from Genesis 50:15-20...

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

In our Epistle Lesson today the Apostle Paul deals with suffering and hope. As in our lesson from Genesis, we are assured of God's active care for us, working for good. Listen to these words from Romans 8:18-30...

Sermon

A father and his son set out on a journey. They took a donkey to carry their packs, a torch to light their way at night, and a rooster, who was a friend of the donkey. The rooster sat on the donkey's head during the journey.

The father spoke often to his son about the goodness of God. "In all things God works for good," he said. The son was not so sure! "We will see if you are right on this trip," he replied.

Shortly before sunset the two arrived in a small village and looked for a place to sleep. They looked and they looked, but could not find a place to stay. Finally, they left the village, and stopped a short distance outside the town.

“I thought you said God works for good?” inquired the son. “God has decided this is the best place for us to sleep tonight,” answered the father.

So they fixed their beds beneath a large tree, and tied the donkey to a smaller tree a short distance away. Just as they were about to light the torch, they heard a horrible noise. A lion had killed the donkey, and carried it off to eat. Quickly the father and his son climbed into the tree. “Do you still say God works for good?” asked the son. To which the father responded, “If the lion hadn’t eaten the donkey, he would have attacked *us!*”

Moments later the rooster cried, and they climbed further up the tree. From their new height they saw a tiger carrying away the rooster in his teeth. Before the son could say anything, the father commented, “The cry of the rooster has saved us.”

A few minutes later a strong wind arose and blew out the torch, the only comfort they had for the dark night. “It appears,” said the son, “that the goodness of God is working overtime this evening.” The father cleared his throat, shuffled back and forth, and said...nothing.

Throughout the latter half of the eighth chapter of Romans, the Apostle Paul has been writing about sufferings experienced in the course of life. He has put value and perspective on this suffering, declaring that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that will be experienced in the life to come.” (v. 8) He has also stated that “The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit prays for us with sighs too deep for words.” (v. 26) Furthermore, Paul testifies that we can live in hope, knowing that Christ himself suffered and died, but God raised him to life. The sufferings encountered here and now don’t compare with the wonder of the future—yet, God is present in our suffering through his Spirit to help.

There is something else besides the experience of Christ, the Spirit's prayers, and the hope of a better life in heaven. That is the realization that our own suffering is part of a much larger process. This is more than simply saying that other people suffer just like we do, although it may help to remember that what we endure, many other believers have endured as well. But here Paul uses the metaphor of child birth. He envisions the created universe as engaged in "one great act of giving birth." (v. 22) In its attempt to usher fresh, innocent life into the world, it is afflicted with severe labor pains. Thus to give birth to life inevitably entails pain and suffering. We are asked to imagine the whole cosmos crying out with groans and labor pains as it tries to bring forth new life. It is a vivid image and one we do well to ponder in the face of human suffering.

Furthermore, the Apostle adds in verse 28 of today's lesson, "We know that in everything God works for good..." Who of us has not heard this expression before? When events and circumstances turn out not the way we want them to, but rather just the opposite. The day of the big homecoming, when it poured rain. The year the farm was lost because it didn't rain. The time we were passed over for a promotion. The time we lost our job. The time when the doctor informed us of a serious illness. After the funeral, when people tried to comfort and console us with the words, "God must have wanted it this way." At times such as these you may or may not have found this thought comforting.

If life can at times leave us feeling helpless, it can also test our faith, our trust in God. To this concern the last part of today's text is addressed.

One manuscript tradition, which is followed by the King James Version and the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible reads, "All things work together for good." Another manuscript tradition, followed by the New International Version and the New Jerusalem Bible reads, "In everything God works for good." The former implies a process of impersonal

providence (“All things work together for good”), while the latter more directly involves God in our history (“In everything *God* works for good”). This latter rendering positions God in a cooperative, collaborative role with us. One of the remarkable features of Paul’s theology is the involvement of human beings in the work of God. In 1 Corinthians 3:9 he says, “we are God’s fellow workers.”

But here the stress lies on God’s involvement with us. Again, we should note the context: suffering. When we suffer, the lingering question is, “Where is God? How can this possibly be for our good?” The question becomes even more pressing when it is asked by those who love God. But scripture declares that God is able to use those things that reflect the depth of human suffering, and turn them for the good. Even at times when the purposes of God seemed hidden and when human forces are ostensibly at work to thwart the divine will, God is still actively at work. As in the case of Joseph in Genesis when his brothers threw this dreamer with his coat of many colors into a pit and sold him into Egyptian slavery. Evil seemed to threaten the divine purpose, but what his conspirators meant for evil, God meant for good. (Gen. 50:20) Just as he did for his only begotten Son on the Cross of Crucifixion.

Our text is quite explicit in locating God’s place and presence. “For we know that in everything God works for good with those who love him.” From start to finish, God’s active concern has been shown for those who live in loving care for God and his will.

I think of Former Moderator of our Presbyterian Church and Professor at Union Seminary in Richmond, Dr. Ben Lacy Rose who said, “God works over, under, around, and through all things to bring about his will.”

Most of us have moments when we feel like we have expressed genuine love for God. Times when we have participated in the life and ministry of the church, sharing time and talent and treasure in service to the Lord. Times when we have occupied ourselves in service to

humankind. When we have expressed loving care for someone who is experiencing mental or spiritual or physical pain. We have felt blest for having been present and working for the good in the life of another. And yet, precisely in these moments, we sometimes realize that it is not we alone working for goodness' sake. Rather, God is working in and through us for his good. Our challenge is to be open to the working of God in us and to work with him for goodness' sake in our lives and in the lives of others.

The next morning the father and son walked back to the village for food. They learned that a large band of outlaws had swept into town the previous night and robbed the entire village of all its possessions. The father turned to the son, saying, "Finally it has become clear. If we had been given a room in the village last night, we would have been robbed along with the others. If the wind had not blown out our torch, the bandits who traveled the road near where we slept would have discovered us and taken all our goods. It is clear, in everything God works for good."

This story has a happy ending, and you might think the sermon should end here. But I know, and you know, not all our stories end happily ever after. And, lest we think otherwise, Paul is not saying this. He is saying only that for his people, God works for good in everything...not that everything that happens is good. When something occurs which is bad, then we are called to work for good in the situation. We are called to the experience of Christ, the Spirit's prayers, and the hope of a better life in heaven. We cannot change what has happened. But we *can* work *with* God for good in whatever situation we find ourselves.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.