

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
July 23, 2017  
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

I Samuel 23:15-18  
Psalm 86  
Romans 8:18-28  
Matthew 13:24-31, 37-43

In preparing for the sermon this week my focus was on the Gospel lesson, and this enigmatic parable of the Weeds and the Wheat. But Paul's words to the church at Rome from our epistle lesson practically shouted at me by the time yesterday rolled around, so I decided to lay aside the Gospel and work with the epistle.

One of the themes of Paul's letter to the Romans is that God desires to adopt us into His family as beloved sons and daughters – not in a metaphorical sense, but in a literal sense. We are called to share in God's divine life, and given the privilege of calling God "Daddy." This begins in baptism, where Paul says that we are "buried" with Christ.

We are called to share in God's divine life through our relationship with Jesus Christ, and that participation is *total*. That is, we not only have a share in Christ's glory because of his resurrection, but the manner in which we participate in Christ's glory is by sharing in Christ's *suffering*. This is Paul's message to the Romans just prior to our text for today.

Now it is fun and easy to focus on sharing in Christ's glory. Most of us need no help or instruction in this area. But it is another matter altogether to realize and to accept pain and suffering in life.

And yet it is an undeniable part of our experience. As you seek to be a follower of Jesus, your life will be marked by pain of various kinds: physical pain, emotional pain, psychological pain, and relational pain. It is unavoidable. It is part and parcel of living in a Fallen world.

In fact, says Paul, the whole created order suffers, and groans like a woman suffering through the pain of labor. The Creation is anticipating the day when God's grace and power will "re-create" it, and free it once again from death and decay.

And God's children are also waiting and hoping for the day when we will be released from pain and suffering, when we will be given our new bodies that know nothing of death and decay. An old gospel song captures a bit of the sentiment, using the image of a house in both a literal and metaphorical sense:

*This old house once knew my children  
This old house once knew my wife  
This old house was home and shelter as we fought the storms of life  
This old house once rang with laughter  
This old house heard many shouts  
Now she trembles in the darkness when the lightning walks about*

*This old house is getting shaky  
This old house is getting old  
This old house lets in the rain and*

*This old house lets in the cold  
On my knees I'm getting chilly  
But I feel no fear or pain  
'Cause I see an angel peeking through a broken window pane.*

*Aint gonna need this house no longer  
Aint gonna need this house no more  
Aint got time to fix the shingles  
Aint got time to fix the floor  
Aint got time to fix the hinges  
Nor to mend the window pane  
Aint gonna need this house no longer  
I'm getting ready to meet the saints. (Stuart Hamblen, composer)*

The day is coming, says Paul, when the whole creation will be made new.

The day is coming when God's children, whose lives are marked by pain and suffering now, will be set free.

But we still live in the "now." Our lives now continue to be marked by pain, by the stench of death, by the anguish of heartache and disappointment. What help is there for us as we continue to carry on in the present?

Paul says a couple of interesting things here.

First, he says, whatever you are experiencing in the present will pale in comparison to the glory that is coming. I think if it were anybody but Paul saying this I might be angry, because it can be easy to dish out comfort to hurting people when you are not hurting yourself.

But Paul has earned the right to say this. Recall the challenges he faced. He was shipwrecked and left for dead; he faced angry mobs and persecution. He had a

physical problem that plagued him so badly that he begged God repeatedly to heal him, to no avail. He was beaten and imprisoned. The list goes on. So when Paul encourages me to put my present challenges of life into perspective and get a longer term view, I sit up and listen.

Second, Paul tells us that as we face the challenge of sharing in Christ's suffering, the Holy Spirit is present with us, and in fact the Spirit prays for us when we get to those times when we are at the end of our rope and we literally don't know how to pray.

Third, Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit prays for us in harmony with the will of God who loves us as His children. And because of that, in ways that we cannot always see, God takes all of our life experience and weaves it together in such a way that His good and loving purpose prevails in our lives. (Connie's cross stitch).

It requires bold faith to believe this, because often in the midst of our present circumstances we simply cannot see how God is working to bring good out of what seems like chaos to us. This is the time, says Paul, when we must wait "patiently and confidently," trusting that God has matters in hand.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, I invite you to remember that the challenges and trials and suffering that you face today are *temporary*, but the promise and blessing of God is *eternal*. The Holy Spirit is in you, and is praying *for you and through you* when you don't know how to pray. And God is taking all

of the pieces – even the broken ones – of your life, and is bending them toward His loving purpose for you.

So come with faith. Bring your burdens with you. Offer them up to him as part of the privilege of sharing in his suffering. And in exchange, let him fill you with his gracious presence.

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