

Sermon for Sunday, July 30, 2017
Matt Lehman Wiens

I should let you know that the Holy Spirit was moving during the writing of this sermon. For those of you keeping track in the pew, the title of the sermon has changed, and is now “Working for Good”. I will freely admit that Paul is not my favorite person in the Bible. I prefer Jesus’s direct calls to action, or the stories of faithful works done by those in the Old Testament. Paul’s absolute declarations about what our spiritual life should be strike me as conservative, as binding, as frustrating. At the same time, though, I recognize that Paul’s view is needed – that just as faith without action is dead, action without faith is empty.

And I do want this to be one of my favorite passages in the Bible. Somehow, though, saying these words always sticks in my throat. In particular, verse 28 - We know that all things work together for good[e] for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

It really is such a beautiful sentiment, and at the same time, I think of the times that I’ve heard this used in funeral lines, and in the wake of tragedy. It is a way for people to express that they want the best for you, but in the midst of grief, it turns to ashes in your mouth.

In fact, in any time when life is not already good, this sentiment seems to fall short. When need and suffering all around us, how can we even begin to think that God is working for our good, or the good of others? It does not seem right to believe that God has a plan that includes suffering, misery, war, starvation, sickness, loneliness, death.

We know that God is a good of love, but how can a God of love allow such hardship in the world? It is a difficult concept to wrestle with. Another, more difficult concept to wrestle with, though, is that while the tri-un God is one of love, she is also a God who reaches beyond our understanding.

Like I said earlier, Paul is by no means my favorite person in the Bible. However, I believe that that is more to do with the way that people have used Paul, than it is what Paul is actually saying. In the Anabaptist tradition, we hold Christ up as the center of our faith, with all other parts of the Bible revealing parts of who Christ is. When we view Paul not as a deity in himself, but as a lens to revealing who Christ is, we begin to see a more complete picture of the God we follow.

Just as the shepherd sees and understand more than their sheep, so God’s plan is so much bigger than what we can comprehend. While we will never completely understand God’s mystery, Paul gives us a window into understanding Christ more deeply. What I believe Paul is showing to us here is that even in times when it seems impossible, each part of the Holy Trinity guides us, and nurtures us.

First, God’s spirit, the Holy Spirit, moves among us in our troubled times. We read that “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes[a] with sighs too deep for words. “

In the midst of trouble, the Spirit hears us, helps us in our weakness. I think of being so angry that I can only shake, so grief-stricken I can only cry, so depressed I can barely move. The church is made of people; but as people, we are weak. The Spirit moves among us, empowering us, overcoming our weaknesses. Our anger is justified, or sorrows are soothed, and our depression is lifted.

We also read that through God, we have been justified. In reading the Gospel message of Jesus’ life, I often reflect back on the theological idea that Jesus’ way is inefficient. To be clear, there is a difference

between inefficiency and ineffectiveness. I believe that Jesus's message is incredibly effective. But in terms of metrics for efficiency, martyrdom is the ultimate loss of power.

To sit idly still when our lives are threatened, to allow for the possibility of our message to die with us, is incredibly inefficient. If we are to carry on a message that will outlast us, why on earth should we die? This is the power of God's justification. Although we may face persecution and oppression for our beliefs, we have been justified in our beliefs by God.

Paul's letter here is to a people that have been persecuted, killed "like sheep to the slaughter." However, because of their faith, they are justified.

Finally, we have also been loved by Christ. In all the mess of this world, it is sometimes too easy to forget that we worship a loving God, a God who sacrificed himself for us. Through the love of Christ, we have been redeemed from sin, and set free.

The lens that Paul provides for us to look at Christ is a spiritual one, a guide for us in troubled times. But our faith, our spiritual view, must also take on a physical component.

If we are empowered by the Spirit, that empowerment means nothing if we do not do. How can we resolve our anger without mediation? How can we remove our sorrows but through time, through community, through finding new joys? How can our depression be lifted if we do not seek counseling, or medication?

If we are justified by God, that justification means nothing if we are not out in the streets, proclaiming the kingdom of Heaven for all to hear. Proclaiming the sword into plowshares, proclaiming the lion and the lamb, proclaiming that the world is turned upside-down. God's justification means that when we take this message out, we need not fear.

And if we are loved by Christ, that love means nothing if we do not share it with all we encounter. Some would leave Christ's love at a love between creator and creation. But the example of Christ that Paul is directing us to shows that that love is so much greater than what we feel between ourselves and our creator. The love of Christ is meant to be shared, to be given away. As the community of Christ, being community means that our love overflows beyond the walls of this church, into our community, and into our world.

So, back to the beginning. I still struggle with the idea that "all things work together for good". However, I also believe that we have all been called according to God's purpose. We are God's church, God's people, and God works through us.

If you go to the LAMC basement, you'll see framed pieces of art that center on quotes from Menno Simons. While quoting Menno Simons seems like a cop-out in a Mennonite Church, I don't believe that we do it nearly enough. In 1541, Simons wrote "If we wish to save our neighbor's soul by the help of the Spirit and the Word of our Lord, or if we see our neighbors in need or in danger, driven forth for the Word of the Lord, then we should not close our doors to them. We should receive them in our houses and share our food, aid them, and comfort and assist them in their troubles. We should risk our lives for our brethren, even if we know beforehand that it will be at the cost of our own lives. This example we have in Christ, who for our sakes did not spare himself, but willingly gave up his life, in order that we might live through him." -Menno Simons, 1541

As the church body, as God's church, this is our calling. To care for both our neighbor's soul and body, at whatever risk to ourselves. And when we work, God works. When we work for good, God works for good.

So, while we will never be rid of evils, of injustice, of sorrow, we can take comfort in knowing that we are the hands and feet of Christ. As we work, the Holy Spirit empowers us. God justifies us. Christ loves us. And as that body of empower, justified, beloved people, we are called to do the same for each other. In that way, God's work will be done. God's work, our work through God, will be for the good of all.