

8 Pentecost, Proper 12, Yr. A

July 30, 2017

1 Kings 3:5-12; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Chapter 8 of Paul's Letter to the Romans is considered by many to be the heart of the letter and, indeed, the heart of his theology. So I'd like to use that letter as our main focus, considering the other readings in the light of what Paul sets out in this part of Chapter 8. There are many concepts packed into just this section of the letter, but I'd like to consider just three of them: prayer, hope and trust.

First, prayer. Paul talks about our inability to know how to pray. There's the collect that we sometimes use at the end of the Prayers of the People that says much the same thing. That we in our ignorance and blindness and sinfulness don't really know what to ask for. We have a very limited point of view and because of that have a hard time recognizing what's best for us and that God always wills only the good for us or, as Paul puts it, "all things work together for good for those who love God." It's said that the prayer that's ALWAYS answered is the one we say over and over again in the Lord's Prayer – your kingdom come, your will be done. Prayer is the subject of the Kings reading. If we were to do a word association game and I said Solomon, I bet you'd all say "wisdom" Solomon is known not only for that wisdom but for his splendid reign crowned by the building of the temple in Jerusalem. As he ascends the throne of his father, King David, God comes to Solomon in a dream and says, "Ask what I should give you." Solomon's response is considered a model prayer: GIVE TO YOUR SERVANT AN UNDERSTANDING HEART TO GOVERN YOUR PEOPLE, ABLE TO DISCERN BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL. Solomon wants to govern well, according to the pattern of a true and righteous King, at a time when the King was supposed to reign the way God would and govern for the good of all, establishing justice throughout the kingdom, especially for those who were powerless – the poor, the widows, the orphans, the strangers. Solomon's reply endeared him to God, who apparently expected a more mundane, self-interested prayer. There's a model prayer attributed to Thomas Merton that says:

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me, and I cannot know for certain where it will end, nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire, and I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, I will trust in you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death, I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone." So perhaps the first challenge in today's readings is to examine our own prayers.

Merton's prayer touches on the other things I'd like us to think about: hope and trust. This Romans reading is most often heard at funerals because it's filled with assurance and hope. What are we hoping for exactly? In his book (*Surprised by Hope*) on this topic, N.T. Wright says that most Christians would answer that question by saying something like, "Well, I hope to go to heaven when I die." And he points out that for many philosophers what you think about death

and the life beyond it are central to thinking seriously about anything else. But he also says that in our current world, there are lots of opinions about death: some think it's complete annihilation, some think we're somehow absorbed into the wider creation, some think in terms of reincarnation. In fact, there are apparently quite a few people who put things in the coffin of their loved ones for life on the other side. Wright tells of one woman who put two cans of spray adhesive in her husband's coffin for his toupee. Unfortunately no one noticed until they exploded in the cremation process.

So what do Christians think about this? What's our hope? Wright's argument is that just wanting to go to Heaven when you die is thinking too small. Because what's going on in creation is what we're hearing in this letter and what we read in the book of Revelation. That God is making the whole creation new and that, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we can see what that new creation is going to look like – and that insight means that we can discern those signs of new creation, those signs of the Kingdom here and now in the 21st century. So it's not Heaven later, but as I think it was Catherine of Sienna who said, "It's heaven all the way to heaven." The kingdom of God is not just in the future, but it's here and now, hidden in ordinary life. Think here of the parables we just heard, especially the one about the mustard seed and the yeast. Hidden, yet growing. So for Paul and the early Christians, the message was JESUS IS RAISED, GOD'S NEW CREATION HAS BEGUN, and WE HAVE A JOB TO DO – discern and nurture the Kingdom.

Paul doesn't discount the reality of suffering. So his hope isn't some kind of blind optimism or pie-in-the-sky thinking. But remember two things: first, Paul was a Rabbi and he would have known the Jewish Bible well. He would have known that first of all, there was the GOODNESS of creation, in which humans and all the rest of the creation were designed to reflect God. He would also have known that rebellion came close on the heels of the creation. Instead of being the wise stewards of creation that God intended, humans ignored God and worshiped whatever they could find that was less demanding. And that rebellious idolatry threw the whole cosmos out of joint. But you'll remember also that Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus and that meeting allowed him to understand God's plan for redemption through Christ, the one human who was totally loving and totally obedient to God's will, the one that was sent to heal the fracture between God and creation, the one who would reconcile everything with God. Paul's hope was grounded in his understanding of God and God's promises. In a little while we'll say the Eucharistic prayer and we'll hear those words, too, the ones that remind us of who God is:

"We give thanks to you, O God, for the goodness and love which you have made known to us – in creation, in the calling of Israel to be your people, in your Word spoken through the prophets, and above all in the Word made flesh, Jesus your son."

And the final thing to look at is trust. This past week, I've read a number of comments about the fact that our society is suffering from a crisis of trust. One of the writers was Rowan Williams (*Tokens of Trust*) and he was talking primarily about England, but others were speaking about America. That there's an air of cynicism and suspicion, the thought that our leaders and our institutions aren't working for us – whether that's government or education, or the corruption and fraud we see in the business community, or the effects of globalization – the suspicion is that

someone else's agenda and purposes are being acted out and that they have nothing to do with my agenda and purpose. Williams takes this attitude, though, and applies it to God, looking at the Apostle's Creed in which we say at the very beginning, 'I BELIEVE IN GOD THE CREATOR OF HEAVEN AND EARTH. You'll remember that belief in the deepest sense does NOT have to do with some kind of intellectual assent but rather has to do with confidence and trust. So to say we believe in God as the creator is to make a statement about where we find solid ground, or refuge or our true home. We can have trust because in Jesus Christ, God has made his agenda perfectly clear – it's an agenda that has to do with human flourishing, with a state of affairs that's characterized by shalom and salvation and life. A state of affairs in which the whole cosmos, the whole creation, will become reconciled to God. That's what Paul is talking about when he talked in last week's reading about the creation groaning, while it waits for us to become the mature Christians we were meant to be, carrying out God's will in the world, making the Kingdom a reality. At one point, Williams says that God is to be trusted as we would trust a loving parent, whose commitment to us is inexhaustible, whose purposes for us are infinitely generous, whose life is the source of our life, who guarantees that there will always be a home for us.

I'd like to close with two stories. One is about my Dad and my sister. Growing up, Annie was very shy and timid, but she idolized our father and was willing to follow him anywhere, including ice fishing. One day they were doing just that and because it was so cold the ice was cracking and booming. She was scared to death, she said and was silently crying. At some point, Dad noticed the tears on her cheeks and bent down to ask her what was the matter. When she told him, he took off his mittens and wiped away the tears and said, "Don't you know that I love you and I would never let anything bad happen to you?" And, she said, they continued across the ice, the ice continued to crack and boom, but with her hand in his, she was no longer afraid. If a human father can love like that, how much more our Heavenly Father?

And one more father/daughter story, this one from the work of Brian Doyle. I share it because it gladdened my heart and because I think it says beautifully what I've been struggling to say.

I was shuffling along the roaring shore of the misnamed Pacific Ocean, pondering this and that and the other, when I saw a crippled kid hopping toward me. She was maybe four years old and her feet were bent so sideways that her toes faced each other so she scuttled rather than walked. I thought for a minute she was alone but then I noticed the rest of her clan, a big guy and two other small girls, probably the dad and sisters, walking way ahead of the crippled kid.

The crippled kid was cheerful as a bird and she zoomed along awfully fast on those sideways feet. She was totally absorbed in the seawrack at the high tide line. In the way of all people for a million years along all shores she stared and poked and bent and pocketed, pawing through the loot and litter of the merciless musing sea. She was so intent on checking out the tide-treasure that her family got way out ahead of her and after a while the dad turned and whistled and the crippled kid looked up and laughed and took off hopping faster than you could ever imagine, and when she was a few feet away from the dad he crouched a little and extended his arm behind him with his hand out to receive her foot and she shinnied up his arm as graceful and quick as anything you ever saw, and she slid into what must have been her usual seat on

his neck and off they went, the dad tickling the bottom of the kid's feet so that I heard the kid laughing fainter and fainter until I couldn't hear her laughing anymore but right about then I was weeping like a child anyways at the intricate astounding unimaginable inexplicable complex thicket of love and pain and suffering and joy, at the way that kid rocketed up her daddy's arm quick as a cat, at the way he crouched just so and opened his palm so his baby girl could come flying up the holy branch of his arm....That kid stays with me. Something about her, the way she was a verb, the way she was happy even with the dark cards she was dealt, the way she loved openly and artlessly seems utterly holy to me, a gift, a sign, a reminder, a letter from the Light....I am not stupid and I saw how crippled that kid was and I can only imagine her life to date and to come...and I hear the roar of pain and suffering in the world. But I have also seen too many kids who are verbs to not believe we swim in an ocean of holy. I have seen too many men and women and children of such grace and humor and mercy that I know I have seen The Holy Thing ten times a day. I think maybe you know that too and we just don't talk about it much because we are tired and scared and the light flits in and around so much darkness. But there was a crippled kid on the beach and The Holy Thing in her came pouring out her eyes and I don't forget it. (*Grace Notes, On Miraculousness*) Amen.