

**8 Pentecost, Proper 12, Yr. A**

**July 26, 2020**

**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 say 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 also 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, 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 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 was expecting 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, although 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.” 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 reading from Romans is most often heard at funerals because it’s filled with assurance and hope. What are we hoping for exactly? In his book 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 are 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 toupe.

**Unfortunately, no one noticed them until they exploded in the cremation process.**

**So what do Christians think about this? What is 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 21<sup>st</sup> century. So it's not heaven later, but 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 – to discern and nurture the in-breaking Kingdom.**

**Paul doesn't discount the reality of suffering. So his hope isn't some kind of blind optimism or pie-in-the-ski 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, human ignored God and worshipped 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. When we say the Eucharistic prayer, we hear those words that remind us 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 is trust. Much has been written about the fact that our society is suffering from a crisis of trust. 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 now, even the police force. We see the corruption in the business community and the effects of globalization, and now the pandemic and economic melt-down. The suspicion is that our leaders have their own agenda at best and have forsaken their roles to foster the common good. But Rowan Williams, the former ABC, looking at the Apostles Creed reminds us that we begin by saying I BELIEVE IN GOD THE CREATOR OF HEAVEN AND EARTH. You'll remember that belief in the deepest sense doesn't have to do with intellectual assent, but rather is about confidence and trust. What we're saying is that in God the creator is where we find solid ground, where we put our trust. We can have that trust because in the life of Jesus, it was made clear that God has to do with human flourishing, with blessing of all creation, with a state of affairs that is 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 talks 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.

I'd like to share three stories with you, all about little girls. The first one is about that part of the letter that talks about the fact that we don't know how to pray as we should. It's about a grandfather passing his

**granddaughter's room one night and overhearing her repeating the alphabet in an oddly reverent way. He asked her what on earth she was doing and she explained that she was saying her prayers, but because she couldn't think of exactly the right words, she was just saying all the letters, knowing that God would put them together for her, because he knew what she was thinking. Paul's thought exactly.**

**The second story is about my granddaughter who is now a lovely young woman who just graduated from college. The story was from quite a while ago. She was probably six at the time and we were all gathered at my mother's. The kids had decided to put on a play. The problem was that they were putting the story together as they went. I suggested they might want to do the story first. I was given the job of being the narrator. All I was given, though, was the introduction, which was dictated to me by that six-year old. It went like this:**

**"A long time ago, a VERY LONG time ago, when there was no violence in the world and all people were at peace with the fellowmen, and all the islands were united and all the countries were in harmony and all the continents had the same way of talking to each other with love, there was a kingdom...." And I thought, there it is, we have the vision, really from the beginning. All we have to do it put it into practice.**

**And the final story is told by Brian Doyle.**

**“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 her.**

**She was cheerful as a bird and she zoomed along awfully fast on those sideways feet. She was total absorbed in the sea wrack 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 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 she looked up and laughed and took off hopping faster than you could even imagine, and when she was a few feet away from him, 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 her feet so that I heard her laughter fainter and fainter until I couldn't hear her anymore but right about then I was weeping like 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 artless 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 called God 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*)

That final thought: we swim in an ocean of holy.  
Amen.