

Sunday, June 3, 2012
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Today we continue our exploration of Paul's letter to the Romans with a selection from Chapter 8. This passage is in the 'teaching' section of Paul's letter. As I mentioned last week, chronologically, this is the last of Paul's letters, written around the year 50. He is writing to the church in Rome, in hope that he can help them address the issues stemming from the growth of the Christian movement.

The reading is from the book of Romans 8:18-28

Sermon - "With sighs too deep for words"

We live in an age where there is an answer for everything.

If you are sitting at a dinner table and someone says, "I wonder...in moments someone has taken out an iPhone and researched the question.

The answers are almost immediate.

In this world of research, knowledge and lightening fast information there is little that we don't know – almost nothing that we can't explain.

We know why the stars twinkle and why the rain falls.

We know how a flower grows and how babies are made.

Technology can tell us where we are and where we are going.

Perhaps the three things that still defy explanation are love, death and God.

We simply cannot explain what love feels like or how it is that we fall in love with someone. It is something we only know by experience.

Poets and writers have been trying for all of time to describe what happens when two people fall in love, but it is different for everyone and words never seem to suffice.

Death, too, we only know from experience.

Not really though – loss we know by experience and the process leading up to death, but death itself remains a mystery.

The journey beyond this life is one that we can only imagine.

We have to wait to find out what happens.

We often turn to God for explanations of love and death, but our understanding of God is also wrapped in mystery.

Scripture is full of poetic descriptions of both love and death.

The psalmist today said, “I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise.”

That is the language of love.

The early church was based on the development of small communities that would support one another based on a mutual love.

They believed that God’s kingdom was close at hand and that the best way to prepare for the return of Jesus was to be in good standing with one another.

Thelma Hall, writing about our relationship with God used Paul’s words when she said, “There is an inner dynamic in the evolution of all true love that leads to a level of communication *too deep for words*. There the lover becomes inarticulate, falls silent, and the beloved receives the silence as eloquence.”

Paul says that this is how the Spirit intervenes for us.

When we don’t know what to say, when we are uncertain about how we feel, when doubts overcome us, the Spirit intercedes, with sighs too deep for words.”

When we are faced with death, when we are looking for love, or when we are seeking God’s presence, we are living in a time of hope.

Paul says, “For in hope we are saved. We hope for what we do not see – we wait for it with patience.”

Patience in a biblical sense is not just a question of temperament; it is a way of training our inner spirit to persevere, as God requires us to wait for answers to our prayers, for the world to evolve, for understanding to come.

As Christians, we learn to take the long path.

Patience also means trusting in God.

We are taught that if we depend on our own strength, we shall faint, and utterly fall; but trusting God and depending on community to hold us up, we shall endure.

Patience as a Christian virtue was particularly important to Paul.

In starting the early churches, Paul’s patience was tested at every turn.

While he taught and preached that everyone should get along and strive for the greater good, his small communities were subject to the same type of conflicts we face in society today.

We are fortunate today to inherit the results of Paul’s patience.

Passed down through generations, his hope prevails.

Patience and hope are intertwined.

Waiting is such a part of our lives, yet with all of the instantaneous technology and communication, we are losing the ability to wait – we are becoming less patient.

When we gather as a community, it is to offer hope to one another, to practice patience.

We bring wisdom and understanding. We bring kindness and gentleness.

Experience has taught us that hope can triumph over fear and loneliness, but that it takes time.

Community can comfort – love can be shared as we wait.

As believers, we know that God’s love never ends and that even when death comes, it can be beautiful.

We know that love most often triumphs and that all lives end in death and that we cannot control either.

But sometimes, even in the knowing, it is hard to be patient.

Again, Paul’s descriptive language paints the picture of “the whole creation groaning with labor pains to be set free from its bondage to decay.”

Sometimes the world seems like that.

It seems like everything is falling apart and that there is no way out of this mess we have created. But there is always hope.

Last month, Joe and I traveled to Italy.

We were intrigued by the ruins of a civilization that seemed to have all the answers.

A society that was dedicated to the importance of culture and education, seemingly disappeared – just stopped being.

When I looked at the remains of the Coliseum or the Forum in Rome, I couldn’t help wondering how the destruction had started.

At what point did someone stop caring about those buildings, that city, that community.

What caused people to lose patience, to stop waiting and to simply walk away and let it crumble.

I felt the same way in the ancient churches.

I was in awe of the grandeur of these edifices, but deeply troubled by their abandonment.

To me these were temples to human ability, more than temples for God.

At some point in time, someone had to say, “It’s too much. It’s too hard. Let’s just let it go.”

The other, somewhat uncomfortable lesson that I took from the ruins of Italy is that civilizations come and civilizations go.

There is no permanence.

Everything is temporary.

As our society groans with a plethora of problems, there is perhaps some comfort to know that even if we destroy ourselves, God's creation will endure.

Paul's message to us today reminds us that creation has been groaning for centuries and that God has been listening. We are assured that no matter how difficult things seem to be, we are promised a spirit that will intercede for us with 'sighs too deep for words.'

Our hope, this hope that we share, comes from knowing that death always comes, but that love always wins and that love is God – God for eternity. It is the love that lasts – It is love that gives us hope.

It is for God that we wait.

Let us pray.

Gracious and loving God, we turn to you this day, seeking your embrace. Open our hearts and our souls to receive the love that you bring.

Let us be alive to the Spirit moving gently through our lives.

Help us to feel your presence in the blowing of the wind, in the blossom of a flower.

Remind us that you are ever present in our lives, regardless of circumstances.

O God, when the world seems overwhelming and we cannot pray, grant us the humility to let others pray for us with sighs too deep for words.

Today, we lift in prayer the names of those whom we love. We pray for Theresa, Don, Gloria, Kit, Roger, Michelle, Warren, Peter – let your healing touch be upon each one.

We pray for all those who grieve: for Heather's family and friends, Saturnino's family – send the Spirit to comfort them and bring them peace.

We pray for those whose names only you know – that each one might find solace in your care.

We pray for creation, O God, that we may work to mend the damage we have caused. We pray for our brothers and sisters throughout the world who live with violence, poverty, fear and loneliness.

Be with them in your gentle way to bring peace to their hearts, their homes and your world.

We turn to you in silence, listening for your voice, waiting patiently for your presence....

Jesus taught them to pray in these words...Our Father