

July 16, 2017 “Intermingled with Good” Romans 8:25-28
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"God works all things together for good" The Apostle Paul, Letter to the
Romans, 8:28

May I begin with a personal story?

This is one of the more personal passages of the Bible. Those who choose this as their favorite have a deep reason to do so- and one of my Aunts, Aunt Emmy, for whom my daughter Emma is named (along with both of her Great-grandmothers)- always said that this was her favorite passage of the Bible.

There is an emotional/ not always fully rational/ reason for choosing this passage as one's favorite, and that's OK with me.

So here's the story. When I go home to visit my mom, who is now a blessed 89, over the past half dozen years now, at breakfast the morning after I arrive, she usually has something to show me, most always from our family history- and its often about my Dad, who died in 1959, when I was just 2 years old. I never know what it will be that she has to share. It is different every time.

A few trips ago she pulled out a letter I had never seen before, hand written by my Dad, in perfect penmanship, from 1958. This is when he was just beginning his cancer treatment, at Thomas Jefferson Hospital in Philadelphia- and he was apparently there for a few nights. My Mom had my older brother and me to take care of, so in the days long before e-mail, apparently, he wanted to set in writing how he was feeling about the prospects for his future.

It's a very short letter, really- expressing full confidence in his doctors, that 'they know what they are doing'- and though some of the treatments for his cancer were experimental at the time, he had every hope that all would come out well. There was nothing to worry about. He would be home soon and things would get back to normal.

Well, they never did. I was too small to know what was going on, but the next year must have been terribly rough. He died at Thomas Jefferson in May of '59.

But my mother has held on to that letter, as much as anything- as a sign of continued hope and a link to the past. I have to say that when I held that letter in my hands, it felt pretty special; it's not just a piece of paper. For as much loss and sadness as I still feel, to

know that he had real hope in the midst of what might otherwise have been a truly hopeless situation somehow gives me hope, too.

How do we keep faith, hope, spirit alive in life- while we ourselves live some distance from it? This is one of life's great questions. Our spirit is sustained by the love of others, all undergirded by God's love. This happens whether we know it or not - it's an invisible pipeline, as it were, supplying us with the requisite necessities for living- all the time.

Sometimes the pipeline seems to overflow, sometimes it seems only to be a drip, drip, drip- (or even bone dry)- but the well of God's goodness is deep, flowing and life-giving... and sometimes the best way to recognize this in our lives is to relax a bit, and let God be God (as they used to say.)

Now that it's summer, I remembered a lesson learned from my stepfather, Bruce, when he was teaching my older brother and I how to swim in the ocean, at the Jersey Shore. I had been accustomed to swimming in the lakes in the Poconos (with little sunfish nipping at the hair on my legs). In fresh water you are not so buoyant, you've got to keep kicking your feet and paddling with your arms to stay afloat. But at the shore and in the ocean, its a different matter.

Learning to float in the ocean is a matter of trust; trusting the world- the salty sea, and oneself. Paradoxically, it is by trusting, by not being afraid, that the waves carry you—

the more you resist, the harder you have to work to stay afloat. I remember watching Bruce's toes rise up in the water, his head arced back and very still, arms below just waving gently- 'that's how you do it' - he'd say.



And it took a lot of trying/ or **not** trying so hard, to learn to be able to do that- to relax into the wave, turn your toes into the oncoming wave, keep the arms gently paddling, and just let it go - with head back & neck relaxed.

It's a good image to keep in mind in words about hope. In some ways, it can help as an interpretive, guiding image for both of our Bible lessons

for today; of an unseen hope that provides support, encouragement and guidance for those who lived through difficulty, even trauma.

The epic story of Joseph, son of Jacob, ends well enough, but not without Joseph having been severely tested... Being tossed in a pit and sold off as a slave seems to be side-stories to us now, obstacles easily overcome, but that is our view in 20/20 hindsight. The key verse from our passage reads: **”Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good.”** There’s a clear sense in these words that God can always take a lemon and make lemonade out of it, but that diminishes the sour taste in one’s mouth that lasts longer than you’d like. It’s clear to see, in the context of the entire Joseph saga- that he is a heroic figure who outlasts all the difficulties thrown at him. He is the strength of God, humbly personified; wiser, more clever, more resourceful than either his brothers or the Egyptians. He is a heroic figure, not larger than life- but surely more clever than usual.

In this way Joseph’s life was intermingled with good. Maybe not every day was a bowl of cherries, but through the resources given him (interestingly, God- as a character, is hardly mentioned in the story at all)- Joseph was able to achieve far more than any Hebrew had a right to expect. And that’s why it’s an important story.

The Apostle Paul’s story is different.... deeper and more pertinent for us today. The key verse is this (8:28)- **“God works all things together for good...”**

The esteemed Bible commentator William Barclay translates the verse this way: ‘...We know that God **intermingles** all things for good for those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose.’ Though I am not a Greek scholar, I had to take a stab at that translation- because it just sounds so right. I’ve concluded that Dr. Barclay took some grammatical liberties in using that word, ‘intermingles’- because the key Greek words don’t lend themselves to being translated that way. But in the context of the whole passage, this really makes sense and speaks to our lives more realistically.

Each of us is an expert in loss, in our own ways... The Apostle Paul surely had more than his share of hardships, 40 lashes (5 times), he was beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, lost at sea, hungry, thirsty and homeless, and in fact in writing these words from prison put him in a unique position to write the words he did. It makes you stop and think. How can he say that “God works all things for good”- if he’s not taking a longer-range view than

his present circumstance? .. and the word- 'intermingle' just makes this all the more realistic and down to earth.

Every day may have its silver lining, but not every day is made up of lying on a bed of roses... As it's been said about this passage many times: we can have confidence in our future only because that future is in God's hands, not ours. And only because God has our future in his hands do we have any confidence at all. We are never alone.

I need to share two final stories here. The first is told by the venerable Rev. Thomas Lane Butts, who, by virtue of his last name, must have lived his life using some gift of humor to make his points. (I know, also, that I shared this story some years ago, and if you remember it, it might work even better this time...)

During the Great Depression, he had an uncle Joe, who had a little sawmill where he worked from time to time. Big saw logs would be hauled to the mill on a long-trailer log truck. One rainy afternoon he was bringing a heavy load of logs up the slippery dirt road. The truck slid into the ditch and could not pull itself out.

Uncle Joe walked a mile up the road to a farmhouse and asked the farmer if he would pull the truck out with his tractor. The man said, "I don't have a tractor, but I have a very fine mule. Old Blue."

Uncle Joe said, "I don't think a mule can do the job. I have a very heavy load of logs."

The man said, "You don't know my mule, Blue."

Uncle Joe said, "Well, bring him on and we'll see."

They hitched Blue to the truck. The man cracked his whip and said, "Come on, Blue!" Blue pulled but the truck did not move.

He cracked the whip again and said, "Come on, Mack!" The truck moved slightly.

He cracked his whip again and shouted, "Come on, Maude!" And the mule pulled the truck out of the ditch, just like that.

Uncle Joe thanked the man and said to him, "Let me ask you a question. Why did you call that mule by three different names?" And the farmer said, "Old Blue is blind, and if he had thought he was the only one pulling, your truck would still be in the ditch."

We are empowered when we believe that someone else is pulling with us and for us. We need not go it alone. There is help, human and divine. It is for us to do all that we can to succeed in life. But we are not in this fight alone.

The final story... (and my mother enjoyed hearing this story when I told it to her some years ago now...)

Before I began my year studying in Scotland, my brother and I took a trip to the northern part of the country. There we bicycled and camped, stayed in a few B&B's and had a grand time.

Part of our excursion was to cycle along the famous Loch Ness, home of the infamous creature, the monster who dwells in the deep below, surfacing just when certain people have their cameras ready- or not.

We bicycled halfway down along the lakeside, from Inverness to Drumnadrochit, a wee tourist town with a few Bed & Breakfasts. It was a very 'dreakie', day, windy, & rainy & gloriously Scottish. The woman whose B&B we stayed at was happy to take us in.

In the morning we woke up to a bright blue sky, and after serving us a fitting breakfast of tea, fried bread, tomatoes & sausage, she had a special request. She wondered if we wouldn't mind driving her along Loch Ness. We both thought that this was a somewhat odd request, and we asked her about it, could she not drive?

"I was married for nearly 50 years, 50, and my husband was a great believer in



the monster, a great believer. Myself, I've never believed it- always thought it was pure nonsense." She paused, "I was the one who always drove along the Loch so he could have a watch- but now that he is gone"- she said- "I have to watch the Loch for him. I do it for him."

So, with my brother driving, carefully (on the wrong side of the road)- and me, squished in the back of the little Mini, we had a grand tour of the rest of the road along

Loch Ness, which we would bicycle later on through that good day. (And no, we did not see Nessie.)

We are never alone- and we carry on with the necessary work left for us to do, nourished by the pipeline of God's love, buoyed by the current of God's mercy always, in ways beyond our understanding.

I am the person I am today because of my father's hope, and my mother's too. I am not perfect by a long shot, but, borne out of hope, I can share that same hope with others, all coming from God in the first place, and so can you- through Jesus' love. Amen.