

All Things Work for Good

Grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ...

When our oldest daughter, Erin, was about 2 years old she had gotten a fever that brought with it a very high temperature... in fact, it was so high that Nora suggested that we take her to the emergency room – and so we did...

And when we finally had Erin in the hands of a few nurses they did everything they could to find out what was going on... they checked her heart, her ears, her throat... the only thing they hadn't done was use a catheter... and so the one nurse said, "I don't think she's going to like this very much – and so I'm going to need you and Nora to hold her when I use the catheter"... and so the idea was for Nora and I to try and provide some comfort for Erin while the nurse did what she had to do – as I held onto one side and Nora had the other...

And of course, Erin cried – and she screamed... but the thing that I'll never forget is how she looked at me (right in the eyes) while I was holding her (as if to say, "Why are you letting this nurse hurt me?"... "How could you betray me?"... "I thought you loved me!")... as her eyes expressed the pain and the hurt...

And I think that for any parent that's always a very difficult thing to have to go through... none of us wants to see our children in pain... but I think I also realized then (and I realize even more today) that had I tried to shield her from that experience (or ignored the nurse's advice) I may have saved her from some pain (but what I would have - *failed to do* - was help her get better)...

In other words, to love my daughter on that day (and in that place) meant that I had to let her go through that experience (even though it was painful, and it was uncomfortable, and she couldn't understand why I was letting it happen) but in doing so it also helped her regain her health (and in turn - go on living)...

I share that story with you this morning because sometimes we, too, go through difficult days (like we are going through today with this pandemic)... and sometimes our experiences in life are painful – our hearts ache with grief or with loss – and perhaps at times we also wonder why God let's certain things happen (or why He lets us experience pain or suffering)...

and I think that one of the stumbling blocks (for many who go through times of trial) is that same question, "Why?"... why is God letting this happen?... why is

my life not moving forward (or why is it falling apart?)... or why did this have to happen?... and why now?...

Haven't you ever asked yourself those questions?... the question of, "why?" ...

I know I have – in fact, I can remember asking that question the day my father died tragically... or the day that Nora miscarried... or even the day that Sandy destroyed so many homes and so many lives in this area... and, like you, I've often wondered, "Why?"... Why would God let this happen?...

But that's why I'm drawn to our reading this morning from Paul's letter to the Romans – Chapter 8 verse 28 – where Paul writes these words, "*We know that all things work together for good – for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose*"...

In other words, what Paul acknowledges is that – yes - there have always been (and always will be) times of suffering... times of pain and loss and grief... and if anyone had experience with those things it was Paul himself... in fact, the Bible tells us that Paul had at times been beaten, arrested, imprisoned, and even flat out rejected and humiliated by those he tried to love...

And what's interesting about the way Paul viewed God in all of his sufferings (was not as a source of blame) but he believed that whatever it was that he was going through (no matter how bad it was) that God could still turn it into something good (or beneficial) for many people (and not just himself)... that sometimes God doesn't rescue us from every painful experience (not because God is heartless or cruel) but because, according to Paul, sometimes it's those trials that make us stronger and more prepared for the next challenges that will come our way (the same way I had to let Erin go through some of her own pain in order to be healed)..

In fact, I'll give you an example of how this is also true in nature... if you were to ever watch a butterfly try to escape from its cocoon you're most likely aware that the little butterfly has quite a job of trying to escape... in many ways, it has to fight for its life (in order to get out of that cocoon)... and I say that because it's quite a struggle...

And as you're watching this whole thing take place you might even think to yourself – why don't I just help the poor guy (and with scissors you could just snip the cocoon apart and help him out without all of the struggle)...

But here's the problem with doing that?... Yes, you might help the little butterfly avoid temporary pain and suffering (but what you'd also be doing is preventing that butterfly from developing its wings – which it's going to need one day to fly)... and so yes, you may have shielded it from pain – but you ended up hurting it in the end...

And so what Paul is saying in our reading this morning to the Romans is that – yes – God could shield us from every trial and every bit of suffering as well – but as Paul sees it God doesn't always do that (because God has a purpose that's different from our own) – and although it doesn't always make sense (nor can it be explained with simple logic every time something bad happens) Paul believed that in the end God was going to allow all things to work for good...

And rather than focus on everything that was going wrong in his life – Paul's great love for the Lord and his never failing belief in God's power to restore, helped him to wait anxiously for God's deliverance... for God to turn all that was bad in his life into something good and wonderful...

And as we look back now – we (as People of faith) can see that God did just that... in fact, because of what Paul endured – billions of people throughout the world have been strengthened by his faith and by his witness... proving that God can truly turn our tribulations into our greatest victories... and that the outcome of every believer's life (has a purpose) when it's gifted with the Grace of God...

You know, this week as I was preparing my message (I could think of so many of my own stories from my own life – where I found the gift of God's Grace in the most unexpected places) – my father's death leading me back to Christ – a miscarriage leading us to adopt two very special girls who mean the world to Nora and me – difficult people in my life teaching me to be more humble – Sandy teaching me about leadership (and learning how to use tools as we took on the task of rebuilding the Lord's house) – and even this pandemic helping us to reach a new audience online, practice patience, and learn what it truly means to 'love thy neighbor'...

And although I didn't appreciate this as a gift at the time (and I guess I still struggle with it occasionally) I started to think about my mother's cancer once again, as well...

As you can imagine – when my family first learned the news that she was sick (it was just before Christmas) and we were all devastated... she had lung cancer (and like anyone else) I couldn't help but think of how unfair it was... and I also couldn't help but think of how difficult it was going to be that Christmas... I mean, how do you

tiptoe around something like that?... and the one thing I hate doing is putting on a fake smile and acting like everything is fine (when deep down I know it's not)...

And can I just tell you something?... that was a year when I almost wished that Christmas didn't come... in fact, I dreaded the idea of what I would say – how my mother would look – what we would talk about... and so as the days grew closer to Christmas I found myself feeling very sad (and perhaps even depressed)... I just wanted the whole nightmare to go away...

But here's the strange thing – and I'm not sure why this happened – but as I have been able to look back on it through the years (that ended up being one of the best Christmas celebrations we ever had with my mother)... and I say that because for some reason it wasn't about the cancer – or about what the future might look like – or what was going to happen to my mother – or what we were supposed to say...

instead, as I remember it, it was a time that my whole family came together out of love for one another (showing support to my mother) but also enjoying that time together for what it was... and it was just that – it was a celebration... a time to be together and be happy (and not depressed)...

And although cancer has a way of scaring us (and taking life away) I really believe that just as God was able to use a frightened and pregnant young woman named Mary (who was also facing her own uncertain future that first Christmas) – I believe that He was also able to use that cancer as an unexpected gift for me and my family that year...

and although we can all interpret life differently, I choose to praise God for that Grace and for that time that I had with my mother... an experience I choose to believe was an unexpected gift... that left me with a memory that I hope to never lose...

You know, I've heard it said that sometimes we make the threats of Satan bigger than the promises of God (and when we do that we suffer as if we are a people without hope)... but as a good friend of mine once shared, "don't waste the difficult days because they're not only an opportunity for us to overcome – but even more importantly – they're an opportunity for us (as the Children of God) to show the world *"that all things work together for good – for those who love God"*...

In fact, that's the very message of the Gospel (that God was able to bring forth victory from the humiliating, horrible death of Jesus Christ on the cross... because what might have seemed like death to most – was life giving to all of us who

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believe in the love of God... who continues to this day – to let all things work together - for good...

May the peace of Jesus Christ fill your heart with faith... May our Lord's love be your strength and your hope... and may the healing hand of God turn every one of your burdens (into a blessing)...

In Jesus' name we pray...

Amen!