

All Things? Really?
Seventh Sunday After Pentecost
July 27, 2014
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Texts: Genesis 29.15-28;
 Psalm 105.1-11, 45b;
 Romans 8.26-39;
 Matthew 13.33-33, 44-52

Imagine this scene with me: a teenager is crying on her bed from the depths of her soul because her heart has been broken and she doesn't know what to do and some well-meaning adult walks in and says to her "All things work together for good for those who love the Lord." Of course the adult means well but the girl, however, experiences this bumper sticker theology as heartless and quite frankly in that moment it is. When we reduce this scripture to a platitude and offer it to someone who is in pain as the answer to their problem, we are essentially saying to them that what is happening is for their own good. Which can very quickly sound like what is happening IS good.

After all, "All things work together for good for those who love the Lord." All things. ALL things. Really? So the unending cycles of attack and retaliation in the Gaza Strip - working together for good? What about the plane that was shot down over the eastern Ukraine last week? What about the divorce that smashed all your hopes and dreams? What about the job that was pulled out from under your feet? Or the diagnosis that came out of nowhere? Any of us want to offer up Romans 8.28 as the answer to any of those questions? And yet this bold promise from Romans stands before us

Will any of you be surprised to hear me say that I think it's helpful if we read it within its context? It is not a statement onto its own to be lifted out as some simplistic slogan. In fact the verses just before it acknowledge that there are moments when we experience so much pain that there are not words to express depth of our suffering. All we can do is groan and turn toward God whose Spirit will intercede for us with sighs too deep for words. The promise that God works all things together for good for those who love the Lord isn't meant to silence our questions or turn us into stoics in the face of heartbreak like the satire of Monty Python in the movie *The Life of Brian*. I don't know if you ever saw that movie. It's about a man named Brian who has a parallel life with Jesus. He is always turning up where Jesus is including at the crucifixion. During the crucifixion the men on the crosses around Jesus (which include Brian) begin to sing this bright and cheery little song called "Always Look on the bright side of life". It's an

absurd and shocking scene. It's meant to be absurd. And it's meant to push at us as believers in Jesus who do sometimes try to put a positive spin on everything or who to put everything into neat, tidy categories, and push aside the deep and troubling questions of life and faith.

And yet I have empathy for the well-meaning adult who wanted to offer scripture in a time of crisis. As followers of Jesus who seek to trust in the promises of Scripture it can be tempting to lift up a verse like Romans 8:28 as THE answer to all questions of human suffering. But if we offer up Romans 8.28 to essentially say "stop crying, cheer up, look on the bright side of life...all things work together for good", we have placed ourselves on the trajectory that ends with the absurdity of that Monty Python scene.

I want to turn to the gospel for moment as an antidote to the impulse to use scripture in this way. In the gospel today we heard several very brief parables that are designed to tell us what the kingdom of heaven is like. To understand the impact these parables were meant to have on us, we have to keep in mind a couple of facts that I didn't know about the culture of Jesus' day. First, we have to keep in mind how tiny the mustard seed is. You've heard this before but usually in the context of encouraging people to see how their small contribution can make a big impact. That's not the point here. The mustard seeds were so small that they could get mixed in with other seeds and you wouldn't know until all of a sudden in the middle of your perfectly cultivated field of neat and tidy rows of crops a bloomin' mustard bush would grow up. They were an annoying nuisance plant - a weed that most people would just as soon pull up and throw out. Any one hearing some echoes from last week's sermon that Dawn Boelkins shared on the parable of the wheat and weeds? Then there is the parable of the yeast which requires us to remember that yeast or leaven in scripture is considered a symbol of corruption. The next parable about the treasure hidden in a field is essentially a story about a thief. Go about and think about that one again. And the last parable lifts up a merchant as the center of the story. In Jesus' day a merchant was regarded with the same level of esteem that we might bring to the stereotypical used car salesman today.

The commentator I was reading this week who lifted up all of these cultural observations was making the point that life in God's realm includes an element of subversion.¹ We aren't called to simply accept what is happening in the world around us; to cheer up and look on the bright side of life. No, following Jesus according to these parables means letting the Holy Spirit disrupt all of our carefully cultivated plans - all the ways we try to simplify the world into neat and tidy categories like the wheat and the weeds from last Sunday's passage.

¹ All of these observations about the cultural context for these parables come from Gary Peluso-Verdend, *Feasting on the Word : Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A Volume 3*(Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 284.

If our approach to the pain and complexity of life is to treat the Bible as the answer book where each and every question can be settled by finding just the right verse, we are missing the way that Jesus invites us to view the kingdom of heaven. Matthew concludes this series of parables by saying that our role as disciples of Jesus is to be the kind of scribe (or keeper of the Scriptures) whose treasure includes that which is new as well as that which is old.

This summer I've been reading Brian McLaren's book *A New Kind of Christianity* and one of the ten questions he takes up in his book is how we think about the Scriptures as the Word of God. What he offers is the invitation to approach Scripture not as a constitution that lays out the laws and rules and answers for every question but rather to receive the Scriptures as the library of the literature that has shaped and formed God's people through the ages. He isn't challenging the authority or the inspiration of Scripture. He makes a very clear statement about the way in which God's Spirit breathes life into the Bible and through the Bible into the community of faith and into our own souls.² What he is challenging is how we think of the revelation of God, the Word of God, coming to us through the Scriptures. If we see these words and books coming together to form a kind of constitution that carefully lays out a clearly defined answer to each and every question that you bring to it, we run the danger of viewing this treasure only in terms of that which is old --- what was spoken long ago and written down and passed along. The Bible ceases to be a living document.

But when you approach Scripture as the library of literature that has formed God's people through the ages, you enter into a conversation that is ongoing. McLaren speaks about finding ourselves pushed *into* the text as we read Scripture. In McLaren's words, we find ourselves "in the conversation, in the story, in the current and flow, in the predicament, in the Spirit, in the community of people who keep bumping into the living God in the midst of their experiences of loving God, betraying God, losing God, and being found by God."³

That's hopefully what happens when we read the story of Jacob. In fact his story, with all of its twists and turns and treachery and redemption, becomes a beautiful example of what Paul means when he talks in terms of God working with us and within us to bring good out of all things. Not everything that happens in this story of Jacob IS good or admirable. But what is revealed through all of these stories of human failing and weakness and treachery and faithfulness, is how God never leaves us. How God is forever pulling us toward the peace and justice and goodness that God intends for us.

² Brian D. McLaren *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions that Are Transforming the Faith* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 83.

³ *Ibid*, 97.

I want to close this morning by stating very clearly and for the record, that I love the book of Romans and in particular this passage from Romans 8. It is a powerful statement about the hope we have in Christ. It speaks of the nearness of God's presence and the utter dependability of God's love. And it does speak a Word for us when we find ourselves in despair. It's just not a Word meant to silence our questions or squelch the expression of our pain. But rather, it is a Word that invites us to open our eyes to look for God in surprising places....maybe even the places of our deepest suffering.

"For I am convinced (along with Paul and I'm sure many of you) that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, not things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

This is good news.

And this IS the Word of the Lord,
Thanks be to God!