



Scripture and Sermon

July 26, 2020

Pastor Kelsey

Romans 8:26-39 (NRSV)

26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes^[a] with sighs too deep for words. **27** And God,^[b] who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit^[c] intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.^[d]

28 We know that all things work together for good^[e] for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. **29** For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.^[f] **30** And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

31 What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? **32** He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? **33** Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. **34** Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.^[g] **35** Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? **36** As it is written,

"For your sake we are being killed all day long;

we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. **38** For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, **39** 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.

Sermon Manuscript:

“Everything happens for a reason” How many of you are familiar with that phrase? Yeah, pretty much everyone. It is a favorite phrase to many. We tend to hear it most when someone dies, when someone has a horrible accident and survives, to explain natural disasters, current events, anything really. It is an easy phrase that helps many feel like things are better than they seem. Everything has a reason, so surely, we can find a good one for what happened to me or to you. Some say it to themselves, some say it to others, especially when they don’t know what else to say. It is almost always well-intentioned. But when we think through the phrase, especially when it is used to mean something like “Everything happens as a part of God’s plan,” the phrase can have some pretty harmful and untrue implications.

Jazz music is an unexpected but good example. It is loved by many as a fun and moody style of music that has been a favorite since its origins over 100 years ago. It developed as a blend of mainly ragtime, marches, and blues. The blues brought the “blues notes” that make Jazz so recognizable. Blues music finds its roots from the African Spirituals and work songs that evolved or were created as African peoples were enslaved in the United States. No matter how much you love jazz, we wouldn’t say thank you to God for enslaving those people so that down the line we could experience blues and jazz music.

Similarly, we wouldn’t say that a 10 year old boy, Ryan Kennedy, died after a battle with brain cancer my senior year of high school so my hometown could come together in new ways and create national attention for juvenile brain cancer.

We wouldn’t say that Midland, Michigan is still in active recovery from the floods over two months ago, so that our state would have a cause to unite over in the midst of the pandemic.

We wouldn’t say that Hurricane Katrina specifically hit New Orleans so that the country would come together for relief and generosity would pour out from all sides.

We shouldn’t say that some people are meant to be born into poverty, inequality, oppression to uphold the status quo of society, or to maintain a quality of life for others, or so that they can have an inspiring story of rising from those circumstances.

We wouldn’t say that someone was meant to have an addiction problem so they could go to recovery and find Jesus.

We wouldn’t say that someone who experienced domestic abuse was meant to be in that relationship so they could become a strong, independent warrior.

We wouldn’t say that anyone is a victim of something horrible so that there can be a positive outcome.

When things go bad, when tragedy strikes, when crisis hits, we so want to make meaning from it. We can be desperate for there to be a reason, for there to be

someone, somewhere with some control over things. We so want to believe that things have to happen for a good reason, that it must have happened to cause a positive impact. People feel like it is empowering to be able to say there is a reason and to strive to figure it out. For those of us who have faith in God, a God who we have a good amount figured out about but also a God who is still quite a mystery, it is easy to put the responsibility on God, out of immediate sight, out of mind, and that makes it more easy to feel better about whatever happened. The phrase stems from our human instincts that want to find a reason, an explanation, for everything that happens, and from us trying to explain why good things do come from bad things. The desire to feel like there is a reason for everything, like it is all part of a plan, is normal and completely understandable.

But, when we say things like Everything Happens for a Reason, and It's all God's Will or God's plan, we are making some pretty strong implications for God's involvement in what happened. If everything happens for a reason or as a part of God's will, then we are implying that all the bad things happen so that good things can happen, and worse that God caused those bad things for the good outcomes. These phrases come from a well-meaning place, but can cause harm to our understanding of ourselves, of our relationship with God, and of how to have hope.

Our passage today, Romans 8, gives us a different way to think about the good that comes from bad situations and what to do with our complicated feelings when there isn't a simple answer for why something happened. Romans is one of Paul's letters written to the people in Rome, and is thought to be his masterpiece of writing. This letter, even more than the others is packed with theological ideas that Biblical scholars have been mulling over for centuries and none of them can be sure that they fully understand exactly what Paul meant. This makes it very unlike the passages we had talked about the last few weeks from Matthew, which is a narrative story being told with some interpretation included. Both leave room for us to interpret things in different ways and be right or wrong, but a narrative is very different from a letter. Paul's Letters are writings of a man trying to figure out theology at the very beginning of this new Jesus movement thing. So, a lot of what he writes is a whole lot complicated and today's passage is not exempt from that. I know that I will not explain what everything means in these few short paragraphs. I am going to focus on the parts of this passage that I have thought about for a long time when I think about how the phrase "Everything happens for a reason" doesn't sit right.

It begins with these verses about the Spirit interceding for us, giving our prayers to God when our hearts are too heavy, we have no words and all we can do is sigh. Paul identifying those moments tells us that they are something we all experience, we will all have moments when the weight of something or somethings bad leaves us feeling helpless. These verses are a reminder that even in those moments, we can be

assured that God hears our wordless prayers through the sharing of the Spirit. Verse 28 continues with how God is at work in those moments. Instead of God watching the plan play out as God expected like everything happens for a reason implies, God is also watching those things happen and is searching our heart, to hear what is weighing us down, and God gets to work making some good happen from it. Verse 28 says, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God.” This speaks to why good things do come from bad, but not because those bad things were part of God’s plan or were meant to happen so the good could happen, but because God is always at work within and around us helping us to experience his love and redemption in the midst of all things. This can look different depending on the situation and the person. It could be a specific positive moment like a community’s response to a disaster, an ongoing positive thing like the lasting positive impact Jazz has had, or perhaps it is simply the lesson learned from a situation like what someone learns about themselves through a break-up.

This time of the pandemic is a great example of this at work. Surely this pandemic is not something that God caused or wanted to happen to us. God did not send this pandemic to kill over 600,000 people in the world, many of them dying alone in overworked hospitals, and leave many more with long-term side-effects. This pandemic is a global tragedy, with its own cause and effect, and series of events that led to where it is today. In the midst of this time of stress, grief, and uncertainty there have been some positive things that wouldn’t have happened without the pandemic. Many of us were forced to slow down and we got to realize how much we had overfilled our lives. Many have taken this chance as a reminder to get in contact with people we hadn’t heard from in a while. Many people started new hobbies, self-care practices, and/or have let their creativity out. We have a new found appreciation for essential workers. We have gotten to include those who can’t come to our church building by worshiping on zoom. We have had to remember what parts of worship and church are the actual essentials. This is God at work in the midst of us, making all things work together for good. Even in the midst of this time that is unlike anything anyone alive now has experienced, we are experiencing sparks of love, joy, and positivity. Our God is a creator, not just in the moment of the beginning of all things, but always creating, making new from old, bringing positive from bad because God hears and cares about what is on our heart and doesn’t just hear us but acts in our lives and the world around us.

This is affirmed again through the verses that follow, 31-36, which among the important things these lines tell us, remind us just how big God’s love is for us. God loves us so much that God sent Jesus, the son, to be among us and live a human life. A human life that was not free of pain and suffering. It is with the death and resurrection of Jesus that we were forever promised that death and suffering won’t have the last word.

No matter how far away we feel from God, no matter how hard it is to see where God could be working things to bring good, Paul reminds us that nothing can separate us from that loving work of our triune God. Verse 35 says, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" Answered by verse 37-39, saying "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. **38** For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, **39** 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."

Nothing can come between us and God. Nothing is so big to keep God's love out; not death, life, angels, rulers, things present, things to come, powers, height, depth, or anything in all creation. Nothing is too big to keep God from working God's love and redemption in our lives. God does not have to have caused something to happen to have an effect on how it plays out or what the aftermath looks like.

So where does this leave us? So far, both Everything happens for a reason and God works all things together for good don't seem to give **us** any responsibility. Paul addresses that too. Reading verse 28-30 in entirety we hear, "*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.* 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. In Paul fashion this is a lot of big words to say something that isn't quite as complicated as he makes it seem. I tried my best to put it in words that we are more likely to understand than all these foreknows and predestined and justified stuff:

All things work together for good for those who love God, who are a part of bringing about God's good in the world. For he knew and reached out to us before all to share love and invite us to love back, to invite us into relationship so we could experience grace and the transformation to become more like the Son. All of us who are shown this grace and love before all, are asked to answer with committing to a relationship with God so that God can work through us and with us, bringing about God's love and redemption in the world.

Basically, God can work all things for good best, when we work with God on that by being in relationship with God. When we work with God, God's goal of redemption for the brokenness and the hurt in the world is coming to fruition around us. When we are working with God, God can work through us to be a part of working things for good in other people's lives. When we have an established relationship with God, we can hold onto hope when things go wrong that God is going to work with it and give us what we need to sustain us through that time. When we have an established relationship with

God, we can more easily recognize God at work amongst us. It is when we have committed to our relationship with God that the Spirit is invited into our hearts and minds and helps us share our deepest sighs with God. When we allow God to see what is most weighing on us, we invite God's action in our lives.

We live in a world in which bad things happen, full stop. We have a God who does not deal out hardships so that good things can happen, but instead have a God who weeps with us and works with us, through us, and around us to make good out of all things, that gives us glimpses into what God wants our world to be like. Let us live life, trusting in a God who wants the best for us, looking for the pieces of redemption that God makes possible, and opening our hearts for God to do more of that work in and through us.

As I was working on this sermon, I was listening to one of my favorite musical groups The War and Treaty. If you haven't heard of them, oh boy, I recommend them, their music is beautiful and powerful. Their story is also one that is a great example of this God working all things for good. The musical group is married couple and musical powerhouse, Michael Trotter and Tanya Blount. Michael was in the army and deployed in Iraq, where he didn't fit the soldier mold, but was known for his love of music. He was shown a piano in the place they were using as an operating base. It was one of Saddam Hussein's palaces that had been bombed out, but this piano had survived. While there, he started to plunk around and using his knowledge of music, ended up teaching himself how to play on that piano. Which became a hugely important way that he processed all the trauma and grief of being in war. He wrote a memorial song for a fallen friend, got to perform it for that unit and it moved them and helped them all so much that they decided that Michael's job in the army was to travel around, learn about the fallen and write a memorial song to play at their service. All that bad was not caused or wanted by God, but was used and pulled together and from it came some good. It wasn't an easy road leaving war, but music found him again as well as his wife Tanya, and he has been doing music with her since, which is just so much good. Much of their music deals with real life things. But as I was finishing up this sermon, their song, "Healing Tide" played, and I thought it was too perfect not to share. This is not the most reflective of styles of music, but take a listen, thinking of how God invites us to take a part in the good that comes from bad.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6yEaovQPh4>

What if I told you you would be the one to bring 'round peace?

What if I told you a willing heart and soul is what you need?

What if I showed you how to make a good out of somethin' wrong?

What if I, I wrote you a song from the heart of your world?

Would you let me be your boy?

Would you be a part of the healing tide?

A part of the healing tide?

A part of the healing tide?

A part of the healing tide?

What if I told you you'd be better off the second time around?

What if I told you not all that goes up will come down? (Yeah, yeah, yeah)

What if I told you how to take the bad and make something good? (Oh, yeah, yeah, hey)

What if I, I gave you my heart from the start of your world?

Would you let me be your boy? Hey

Would you be a part of the healing tide?

A part of the healing tide?

A part of the healing tide?

A part of the healing tide? Oh

Would you be a part of the healing tide?

A part of the healing tide?

A part of the healing tide?

A part of the healing tide?

A part of the healing tide?

A part of the healing tide?

A part of the healing tide?

A part of the healing tide?

What I showed you how to make a good out of somethin' wrong?

Would you be a part of the healing tide?

Let it be so. Amen.