

God Works For The Good

Romans 8:26-39

July 30, 2017

First United Methodist Church, Lindstrom

(This is a manuscript prepared for sermon delivery and may not represent actual words spoken.)

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

We are finishing up this eighth chapter of Romans. Remember, as was mentioned last week, chapter eight talks about the life lived according to the Holy Spirit. This chapter also talks about some of the blessings of the Spirit. Last week we talked about our being adopted into the family of God. We have received the Spirit of adoption. It is by that Spirit we call God, "Abba, Father!"

The section we read today mentions further blessings of the Spirit...blessings of the life lived as a child of God.

For example, have you ever not known how to pray? By that I mean have you ever not known what to say? We know how to pray. We just talk to God. But there are times when we are at a loss for just the right words. At such times I would encourage you to just call out to God. Just cry out. Paul assures us in today's text that there are those times when we don't know how to pray or what to say. At such times the Spirit will intercede for us. The Spirit will express what is on our hearts...and do so in ways that our words cannot express. This is one of the blessings of the Spirit. More on this in a bit.

Then there is this other truth Paul talks about...this other "benefit" of living life as a child of God. Paul says that in all things God works for good. Now in the next few minutes I just might say a thing or two that some just might disagree with. That's okay.

Here's the deal. I believe—and this is my belief and conviction—I believe that not everything that happens in this world is the will of

God. God gets blamed for a lot. Not God's fault. I've known folks who have given up on God for things in which God played no role. Not everything that happens is a part of God's plan.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And everything was good. It was perfect. It was paradise. There was not one thing bad in what God made. Then sin entered the picture. And it was with sin that bad stuff came into what God created. I invite you to read Genesis, chapter three. There you will discover all that became a part of life as a result of sin...our sin. So I repeat: there is so much that happens that God never intended to happen and that God still does not intend to happen. Bad and evil are not part of God's perfect plan and will. As I said, this is my strongly held conviction.

Still, so often I have heard in my time as a pastor people say, when something bad has happened, "Well, I guess that was just God's will." And I have had to figure out ways to pastorally say, "I don't believe that."

I have this book in my office. It is called *My Pastoral Record*. In it I have recorded every sermon I have preached, every baptism I have done. Every wedding and funeral I have officiated. In that book I also keep just this one obituary from the first funeral I officiated. It has yellowed a bit, but I keep it. The name of the person was Neal Preston. He was twenty-one years old—just two years younger than I was at that time. He died of leukemia. He left behind a wife and an infant son.

It was in Kentucky...Salyersville. That was where I served as a student pastor while attending seminary. I went to school just south of Lexington during the week...and then went to serve that mountain church on the weekends. Before I left for Kentucky, my pastor told me that it

wouldn't take long—after I arrived—for someone from the church to come to me with a crisis. They would come to me because I was their pastor.

Sure enough. The U-Haul was barely unpacked when Todd Preston, Neal's father, stopped by to tell me about his son. His son was currently in the hospital in Lexington getting treatment for his leukemia. He wondered if I might find some time to go see him.

Of course I would. I was their pastor. But boy, oh boy. I was barely out of my youngster years myself. I hadn't even started seminary. What would I say? What words of comfort could I offer? How could I be a pastor in that situation when I didn't feel close to adequate? But you know what? I was the pastor. I could not hide behind the shield of inexperience.

It became a bit more difficult when I did visit Neal and he asked me questions like about why God had chosen him to get this disease. Tell me why, Preacher. That's what they called me. Preacher. Neal died just a few months after I arrived. I sat with his wife and held his infant son. I sat with his parents and his sisters.

The day of the funeral the church was packed. I mean packed. I'll never forget. I can still see it. My first funeral. I officiated it and preached above the sounds of people weeping and clearing their noses. And so many times during that whole deal I heard people trying to comfort themselves and one another with the words, "Well, I guess this was just God's will." I so desperately wanted to comfort them with the words that no, this was not God's will. I tried. I tried.

I tell this story because Neal's father died just a couple of weeks ago. See, I kept in touch. To this day his father remains a great example to me of faith in the midst of suffering...present suffering. He was one who said to me, "Preacher, this kind of pain really isn't a part of God's plan for us, is it?"

I also tell this story because we read in our text today "that in all things God works for the good of those who love him...."

Okay...so last week we read verses twelve through twenty-five of this eighth chapter. In that section, remember, Paul talked about our present sufferings. So we can infer from this that Paul was referring to sufferings he and his readers were enduring. Just exactly what those sufferings were, Paul does not say. But he does give us an idea at the end of this eighth chapter. Paul may have been referring to the sufferings for being a follower of Jesus in a pagan context. He may have been talking about suffering in general. Whatever. Paul reminded his readers that those sufferings were not worth comparing to future glory. We do well today to keep this in mind.

Then, as mentioned at the beginning, the Spirit intercedes for us. The context is our present sufferings. So while enduring present sufferings, we may not know the exact words to use when calling out to God. So we just call out...we cry out. The Spirit will take over from there.

This is followed with the words about God working all things together for good...or in all things God is working for good. Again, I remind us, that the context here is our present sufferings. So all our present sufferings...in those sufferings we know that God is working for good. Notice that Paul says "we know" this.

So here is what we know...or what we need to know. We need to know, one, that God does not cause any of our present sufferings. And here is where I have had many folks disagree with me. Fine. But this is my conviction. I simply do not cotton to the notion that a loving and gracious God decides to throw a little cancer this person's way in order to toughen them up, or in order to see how they will handle it. God does not visit financial difficulty on a person in order to teach them a lesson about trust. God does not arbitrarily pick and choose who suffers and who prospers. Now I also believe that God is fully capable of stepping in and preventing such things. But God isn't the author. Once again, my conviction. These things just happen because we live in a fallen and sinful world.

So we need to know, second, that during such times—while in the midst of present sufferings—God does not abandon us. This is

where so many people get tripped up. They think God abandoned them. This is not true. God is present...always and forever present. God is not working against us. God has not stopped working on our behalf. God is working for us. God is on our side during any present sufferings. If we believe that, we will see it. But we must know and believe that to see it.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

I mean, think on this for just a moment. I am guessing that each one of us can think of something—an event or series of events. It was bad. But later there was a little bit of good that resulted. The bad was not God. The good was.

I told the story of Neal. Here's the deal. The leukemia? Bad. All bad. Not a part of God's plan. But the faith of his father...the faith of his family. People witnessed that even as they wrestled with their "why" questions. All over town people wondered how they could remain so strong...how they could still maintain an unshakeable faith in God. People who had never attended church wanted to know more about this faith thing. People came to Christ. That part was God.

So we know that in any present sufferings God is working. God is working for good. God is working for us. So, as Paul asks in our text, if God is for us, who can be against us?

Finally, we know that God loves us. In our present suffering, God loves us...and God will always love us. Paul concludes by asking, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" The context, once again, is our present sufferings. Paul continues, "Will trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?" Will any of these sufferings separate us from God's love? The answer is no. Paul says there is nothing—nothing in all creation—that will separate us from God's love.

We are children of God. Trouble and hardship and sufferings come. They do not come from God, but they do come. God is working for us in all these things. God is on our side. Nothing—nothing that happens to us—will ever separate us from God. This is what God has planned for us. This is God's will for us. We can encourage one another with these words.