

The Heart Searcher  
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Romans 8: 18 – 30  
April 29, 2007

During the two Bible Studies of which I am gratefully a part, there seems to come a time each meeting, almost a predictable moment, when the struggles of the world meet scripture in search of an answer. Someone, with an honest tear in their eye, brings up the civil war in Iraq, the massacre in Darfur, the shortcomings of the United States, disease, children with unforeseen challenges... and often, for a moment, there is a holy silence.

Last Sunday we began with Paul's words "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us." It was both a admittance that the world is a place of suffering and a revealing of the Christian hope that all the people and all the earth can be, will be, someday, redeemed—that which God created them to be.

Likewise, verse 26, begins. *Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.*

Given what has come before, I read *weakness* as our inability to see our way beyond the present strife; our inability to see clearly the future God has planned.

Likewise the Spirit *helps* us in our weakness.

Help isn't the help someone needs who is at the bottom of a sinkhole. Rather it is more like the kind done in the kitchen, where one cuts up the ingredients while the other puts them all together. Luke 10:40 is the other place in scripture where the Greek word for "help" is the same as the one used here. That scripture is where Martha says to Mary, stop listening to Jesus but get up and **help** me make everything ready.

The spirit's help is what we need in order to keep believing that God is recreating the world in God's own image when confronted by another vision.

Pastor Alan Kimber tells the story of when he was a pastor in his native South Africa. Apartheid was the law of the land in those days.

On one occasion there was a student protest in Capetown. The police were called in, and they chased the protesters into the cathedral and they beat them in front of the altar, arrested them, and hauled them off to jail.

Kimber was outraged. All he could do, he says, was to preach about it, but somehow it wasn't enough.

We too have stood in places where words were not enough...in the shadow of the cross.

When we come face to face, as we often do, with our inability to see God's plan for our world, when we allow ourselves to remain there in a place of weakness, of sorrow, of grief, Paul says that at those times the spirit will come alongside us, and lift our prayers to God.

We've learned, well probably we are all still learning, how important it is for us, when one holds up the image of the unredeemed world, to not run from the cross by moving immediately into a discussion of a political solution or to scapegoat those who see things differently.

We are learning to allow each other to share, to not immediately speak our sage advice.

We are learning to not even direct God to go do what we think ought to be done...

We are learning to stop the monologue

We are becoming more and more willing to wait with Paul, in the uncomfortable place of the unredeemed, at the foot of the cross, believing just as Jesus was lifted up, so will God recreate the world.

On Friday a newspaper had been left on the train I rode to take Rachel to her Grandmother's house in Riverside. In the paper I read stories which made me sad: Teachers leaving the profession frustrated that kids wouldn't/couldn't do what was necessary to learn, a military officer's

assessment of Iraq, and a mother and father abruptly taken from their home and children—deported to Tijuana. When I got home, I sat in my prayer rocking chair and opened my mind and heart to God. No list, no attempt to have God write the sermon that loomed large before me, just a few words I made up to say inwardly—something like holy God, bring peace...as I breathed in and then out... Pictures from the paper came into my mind. I continued to say the words on my breath and remained for awhile in the sadness. Then there came an image...of Jesus sitting by my side...not holding me or leading me...more like praying with me through a shared sorrow.

*God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.*

Now such openness to the spirit is not simply a gift given to me, to pastors, to priests, or to the monks in Santa Barbara. Understand that when Paul says saints in verse 27 Paul is talking about all of you who are the church. For God is the one who seeks not credentials or collars, God is the one who searches the heart.

As a jeweler seeks the oysters that have a pearl, God is a heart searcher, searching for those with the pearl in their soul that is created by the friction between the cross and resurrection, and thus can radiate beauty that shines through the pain of living in a broken world.

Verse 28...a slightly different reading from the RSV, supported by the most ancient manuscript...

***We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.***

In contrast to the reading in the NRSV, it isn't that all things are good, rather that God works for good with you who are the pearls created by the friction of living with the cross in view of the resurrection.

In 1977 an endearing movie was made called *Oh God*. In the movie, John Denver plays a supermarket manager named Jerry Landers, an atheist. God decides that this is the man who should represent him, market his name and desire for the people of the world. God, in the form of George Burns, appears to Jerry and the story begins.

Here is part of a review listed on Amazon written by Simon Davis of Melbourne Australia:

“Prior to this film’s release I’m sure George Burns would never have come to anyone’s mind if they had been asked to describe what they thought God was “supposed” to look like. Depicted in the movie as an eighty something little guy with glasses, wearing a baseball cap, and with a dry ready wit it somehow totally works and seems perfectly natural. Ever since my first viewing of “Oh God!” many years ago whenever my thoughts turn to the “guy upstairs”, in an instant, an image of George Burns in his baseball cap and plaid work shirt shuffling along the street springs automatically to mind.”

The movie successfully brought God down to earth. Unlike many portrayals of God, often a disembodied deep voice, this one chose to use a mere, albeit funny, mortal.

Our scripture suggests, like the movie, not only is it possible for a mortal to be the image of God, but it is necessary. If God’s future is ever to be known, it is necessary for us mortals to become true reflections of God’s image,

NT Wright, the author of the New Interpreters Bible Romans commentary, makes the connection.

He describes how the Caesar cult during the time of Paul’s writing was gaining power. The Caesar cult was “instantiated ... [instantiated for those like me who didn’t know, means to exemplify something, to provide an example to support or explain something]... The Caesar cult was “instantiated around the empire by means of images of Caesar himself, soon to be divine, and of the son(s), heir(s), and other family members themselves all divinities-in-waiting. These images, housed in various places but particularly in temples of the growing Caesar-cult were there partly in order to be worshiped, and partly in order to remind the local residents whose empire they were living in.” [New Interpreters Bible, p. 604]

NT Wright suggests that it is Paul’s argument that if the local residents are to know whose empire they are truly living in... well it is up to the saints, those of the church, to be like the temples that surrounded them. They were to be the living temples of God, the images of God, who exemplified, who

showed by their deeds that God is the one redeeming the world. We who are called to be God's image bearers are to instantiate in our neighborhoods, and in our grocery stores, in our volunteer efforts, and in our paid efforts, in our calls to friends and calls to strangers, God's future redemption of all things.

Now, I know, that even as I speak, there are some of you who have already started to make your lists, your plans of just how you are going to instantiate God's future redemption. There's that phone call you have put off. There is the neighbor who you wanted to talk with today. There is the council meeting or the board of directors expecting your input. There is a city in need of servants. There is an unjust policy that needs to be changed. There is your mother who you know wants a visit. There is a celebration to be planned and a few things you need to do today in order for you to do your job well tomorrow.

Holy God, bring peace.

The problem for most of us isn't that we don't feel called. Rather, I'd say, we feel called on way too much. We are wrung out and spent. In the monologue of all we are "called" to do we present to the world a distorted image of ourselves and thus a distorted image of God. We too often exemplify, not a powerful redeeming acting God, but rather one who is on the edge, not so far from giving up.

Stop the monologue. The cross, the pain of the world, no matter how amazing you are, will remain. The question is will you? Will you remain open to the heart searcher, to the spirit, that you, like Jesus, might be God's shining pearl in the midst of the struggle. Will you allow tribulation to be transformed...suffering to become a place of creativity, a place full of power and promise? Will you allow the road which is impassable to be made again through the crucified and risen Lord?

We often talk and plan and advise in hopes that the cross can be avoided—sometimes to deny its existence in our midst. It is as if we are afraid that the the story will end there. We fear that our lives, indeed our world, will end in the struggle of the unredeemed.

Those who are predestined to be conformed to the image of God's son, of Jesus, have another way, a way through the struggle, a belief that the struggle itself can give birth to God's glory.

Those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

We don't need to avoid the cross, the tears of living in the unredeemed world. Some of the holiest moments in our share time come when we don't avoid the cross in our lives. Some of the holiest moments come when we, instead, take hold of it, and lift it high. For those who listen...we keep silence, we allow it to be seen.

When we lift high the cross, when we allow it to be lifted high, we make the statement that the trouble in our lives, the trouble in our world, can be transformed, indeed is God's entry point to create anew.

If trouble and suffering is the very place of God's most creative activity...well then...

I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor 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.

Father, in Thy mysterious Presence kneeling,  
Fain would our souls feel all Thy kindling love;  
For we are weak, and need some deep revealing  
Of trust and strength and calmness from above.

- Reverend Samuel Johnson, "Father, in Thy Mysterious Presence kneeling," 1846.