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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 11A)

July 20, 2014

Text: Romans 8:18–27

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

People think about things in different ways. Some people are more artistic and poetic in their thinking; they think using vivid scenes, rich word pictures, and comparative analogies that allow for expansive contemplation and imagination. Others are more analytical; they think using facts and figures, tables, and graphs, and bottom-line conclusions. Both ways of thinking are God-given and good. And both ways of thinking are present in today's epistle reading from Romans 8.

Analytical thinking is found in vs. 18, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." Here, the apostle Paul is using the technical language of finance: "consider" and "comparing" are the words used by accountants, merchants, and business men. This is bottom-line type thinking. Is it profitable or not?

Think in terms of a balance sheet, of debits on one side and credits on the other. On the debit side is all the sufferings of this world. On the credit side is the future glory of the new creation. What do you think a bottom-line analysis reveals? A balanced sheet? Equal suffering offset by equal glory in heaven. That would be consistent with religions of the East holding to some form of karma and nirvana. Good karma offsets bad karma until you reach nirvana, nothingness, a zero-sum. What about a negative sheet? More suffering than heavenly glory. That would roughly correspond to various evolutionary expectations for the universe. Eventually our sun will die and this solar system will die along with it. Thus the evil of the extinction of every known living thing will prevail. The evil of death triumphs. Neither of these fits Biblical teaching.

What about a positive sheet? Heavenly glory positively compensates for present sufferings. Now we're getting somewhere. Paul proclaims that the future glory awaiting the redeemed of the Lord is so great that the sufferings of this life "are not worth comparing!" Don't even waste the paper and pencil trying to see how things turn out. The glory of the future is so exceedingly great and abundant and prosperous

that the evils of the present are of no more significance than a passing wisp of water vapor.

Some might be tempted to think that Paul lived in posh, 1<sup>st</sup> century Mediterranean villa with little to nothing to vex him. Or maybe he was some ivory tower theologian sitting around writing theoretical treatises about pain and suffering while reclined in his La-Z-Boy, smoking a pipe, drinking cognac, and eating caviar. This was hardly the case. Paul knew suffering personally and experientially. Listen to a summary of his life. He had been imprisoned, exposed to death, five times he received the forty lashes less one, three times beaten with rods, once nearly stoned to death, shipwrecked three times, a night and a day floating on the open sea; he knew sleeplessness, hunger, cold, nakedness, and he bore the pressure of all the churches he founded. Some theologians believe that Paul may have suffered from debilitating headaches and near blindness (*thanks to Rev. Bill Cwirla for compiling Paul's "laundry list."*).

And he also knew the suffering of the world. In vs. 21 he described creation, the universe, as being subject to the "bondage of decay." There's a good deal of anxiety in our culture about the sustainability of the earth. People are worried about climate change, retreating glaciers, species extinction, droughts, floods, new resistant strains of bacteria, viruses, and diseases, sustainable energy and food for 7 billion people, not to mention all the human problems of war, terrorism, broken families, addictions, human trafficking, crime, and on it goes. The Bible consistently teaches that this world is passing away. For you bottom-line thinker, the universe is dying; it will not remain forever.

For the more artistic and imaginative learners in our congregation, Paul uses a very provocative and powerful analogy to describe how intense the sufferings of creation are. Look at vs. 22. You moms will definitely understand what Paul says, "For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now." The violence of the natural world is awesome: hurricanes, tsunamis, flooding, volcanoes, earthquakes. All those events, and countless others, are like hard labor contractions. They hit with a violent intensity, subside momentarily only to return again. The closer we get to the End Times, the more intense they will get just like a woman in hard labor. The hardest contractions occur closer to delivery.

So when you consider this world according to both ways of thinking things appear to be in trouble. On this side of eternity, the ledger sheet reveals a huge deficit (suffering appears to be more prevalent than glory). Or, on this side of eternity, the universe is

enduring a high-risk pregnancy with complicating factors. For both ways of thinking, the outcome is in grave doubt.

Except when you consider one thing, or better one Person: the crucified, resurrected, and ascended Lord Jesus Christ. He shifts the ledger sheet to infinitely positive. He brings this corrupted, dying creation through its difficult labor and delivery to the new creation whose glory and life can never be extinguished or diminished.

Return back to vs. 20, “For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope...” Who is subjecting creation to futility? Adam and Eve? The Devil? No. God subjected this universe to the futility of decay and death and sin and evil and the devil too. That subjugation began in Genesis 3.

But He subjected the universe to this condition “in hope.” It would not be left to this futile and empty existence. And that hope is defined for us in vs. 21. Now get ready. This will knock your socks off! Creation was subject to futility “in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” In other words, the hope of creation’s release from bondage and futility is inseparably and intimately bound up with the redemption of God’s people on the Last Day. The universe’s redemption is connected to your redemption; creation’s glory to your glory!

When the eternal Son of God took on human flesh and blood in Mary’s virgin womb, God was taking creation into Himself. He would not cast it away as so much garbage to be disposed of and forgotten. Jesus not only took the sins of the world to His cross but also creation’s bondage and decay. Jesus carried all humanity and all creation with Him into His tomb. And when He rose again in the glory of Easter morning, all creation came with Him. The glorious future we have as God’s children is now the universe’s future. That hope belongs to us and all creation.

But this hope is not yet fully realized. Biblical hope is more certain than mere wishing for the improbable, you know, I hope it snows a foot in July! Biblical hope is founded upon sure and certain promises anchored in God’s faithfulness. Look at vs. 23, “And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” On the one hand, we have the forgiveness of sins, complete justification in God’s sight, the in-dwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, and the privilege of living in faith and love. On the other hand, our redemption is not yet complete. We groan for something

more, something eternal and substantive. That something is the redemption of our bodies. We are waiting for the eternal future when we no longer need medicines, doctors, lawyers, soldiers, pastors!, shelter from the convulsive labor pains of creation, and so forth. That hope is yet in the future.

And creation is waiting for that redemption too! When we are bodily resurrected – and I mean resurrected in glorified flesh and blood just like Jesus – then this old creation will give way to the new creation. The ledger sheet will show what we know to be true by faith. Eternal glory does infinitely overcome earthly sufferings. The labor pains have stopped as the new creation is born.

God works through all the suffering of the present age to bring forth a renewed creation, a restored and perfected humanity. Or to put it more concretely, God the Trinity is perfecting you. The Spirit of adoption, the Holy Spirit, will bring you and all creation through the intense sufferings of this age to the glory of the new creation revealed in the resurrection of the Last Day. In the meantime, we wait in hope.

For the analytically minded, the ledger sheet of the future is infinitely positive. For the poetically minded, the glory of the new creation surpasses even the most vivid imagination. In Jesus, we and all creation has a hope worth waiting for.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.