

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

July 23, 2017

Broken—Good News for Tough Times: Labor Pains

Central Presbyterian Church, Montclair

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Titus 3.3-7

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. But when the goodness and loving-kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Romans 8:12-25

¹²So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— ¹³for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. ¹⁸I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Hope. Hope. Hope.

Five times in the last sentences of this text Paul points us again and again to hope. What is hope? What is hope to a Christian? Why does Paul think it is so crucial to repeat it over and over again as though we need to have it drilled into our conscious and subconscious brains? After using words like fear, suffer, futility, decay, groaning, slavery...after using words like these how does he end up with hope?

Maybe you heard the interview, as I did this past week, with a pastor who is leaving his denomination. He is African-American and has had enough. He says he has tired of feeling the sting of racial discrimination among his colleagues in ministry. He feels discounted, sidelined, maybe even used, to keep in place a traditional racial hierarchy in his church. Traditional, at least as far as many see it- even to many who pray alongside him and confess Jesus Christ as Lord. He has suffered, felt deep futility in his ministry, sensed a divine dissatisfaction with the world that seems to be sick at its core. When, as a pastor or just an ordinary Christian, can he expect to be welcomed and valued and respected in his own church, let alone the big wide world?

Paul addresses this pastor's pain by saying he, and every Christian, is in debt to the Holy Spirit. Yeah, that pesky Holy Spirit is just not going to go away. Paul is determined to plant his view of the criticality of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and our minds. In the style of James Carville, if he was a theologian, “It’s all about the Spirit, Stupid!”

We are in debt to the Holy Spirit. We Christians are aligned with the life that the Holy Spirit provides, rather than life in the flesh. In that Spirit we are given life and peace. It is a gift, not

something we earn. It is life everlasting. It is freedom. It is living with a purpose now, a purpose that God has made the goal of this new creation.

We do not live according to the flesh, trying to make our way by our own wits, because that way leads to death, to a dead end, to a blind alley. When we are our own gods, when “me”, “myself”, and “I” are in charge, there is trouble just around the corner.

We do not live that way, we live because of the Spirit and the gift of new life that allows us to thrive as we are meant to thrive, as all of creation is meant to thrive. And I don’t mean we will find a better life, a fuller life, when we make better choices, when we are less sinful. Because we are already in the Spirit-- we make better choices, we live in a different way, we live in the ways of Jesus Christ.

I had a pastor friend in the city who led his thriving congregation on a New Beginnings type of discernment. Part of what they were doing was trying to arrive at a mission statement, a very brief statement that would summarize their life together. And after all their discussions in small groups they settled on this: “We want to be more like Jesus.”

I believe living in the Spirit, which is Jesus’ spirit after all, is just that- living more like Jesus.

Imagine, giving more and more like Jesus has given. Seeking the good for someone else, giving your time and energy and feelings and life, more and more, for the sake of others. Including those who love you and those who don’t.

Imagine being a church whose bottom line is, “How much did we give this year?” “How much more can we give next year?” Imagine solvency being defined as relying on the Spirit rather than on our savings. We say we live in the Spirit, that the Holy Spirit is our source of breath and life and future and thriving.

Imagine, trusting more and more like Jesus trusted. He had nothing as far as we know. But he had the Spirit, and more accurately, the Spirit had him. The Spirit was at work through him in the lives of those he touched. Resources came and resources were spent just as quickly. The investments were in the Spirit. And he thrived under the Spirit’s direction.

This week will be a test for the youth group of this congregation. We are going to be challenged to live simply- sleeping on a mattress on a floor, sharing showers, taking public transportation, meeting people who have nothing in the world but whatever they carry themselves. I’ve been thinking about this organization we are going to work with. They say they will give us a peanut butter sandwich and a snack for lunch. That’s more than some of the people we will meet will be eating. Can we trust that God will provide, or will we be worried and start collecting and storing extra food in our backpacks in case we get hungry? What does it mean to trust that in the Spirit we will thrive?

And when we do meet someone who is hungry, will we share our sandwich if we don't have another in our pocket?

Being more and more like Jesus is not just something to think about. What if do it? What if we become willing to risk, and to be vulnerable to the Holy Spirit's ways of doing things?

There is a struggle in our world between God's ways and the world's ways. That pastor whose story I shared a moment ago is sharply aware that the world sees him one way and God sees him in quite another. If we become more and more like Jesus, more and more under the spell of the Holy Spirit, we will know conflict.

We will see the differences in the two ways of living. We will look different. We will act and speak differently. We will attract attention and questions and criticisms and disagreements because life in the Spirit, life that seeks to be more like Jesus is just different.

The Roman Christians who read this letter first knew all about conflict. They were the first to live in the Holy Spirit. They had nothing. They were nobodies in their community. They had no buildings, no seminaries, no books of order, not even a New Testament yet. But the Spirit had them. And they thrived.

We have hope not because we think we can figure this life out, not because we have resources we control, but because the Holy Spirit has adopted us, is committed to us, is breaking into the world with a new way, Jesus' way.

And being able to look back on Jesus' incarnation in this world, on his generous life, and death, and on his resurrection, we have confident hope that the Holy Spirit is unclenching our grip on this world's ways and taking us into a new creation that is groaning to be made whole once again.

I often wish I knew what it was like to give birth. But what I do know is that it is not easy. Not for mother or child. We are in the birth canal. We're being stretched and pulled back and forth. It hurts to let go of the old ways and take on the new.

But God is in command of the pain, in control of the tearing and the disruption, using it all to shape us into the children of God., those who live in the Spirit. Out of our brokenness God is bringing beauty. Out of pain God is bringing life.¹

That is hope.

¹ Kelley, Jessica Miller, ed. *A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2016, p53.