

Is It Futility, or Is It Hope

SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, Proper 11[a] July 23, 2017

ROMANS 8:18-27

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. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹ 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.** ²² **For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.** 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.** ²⁴ **For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?** ²⁵ **But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.** ²⁶ **Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.** ²⁷ **And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.**

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.

“And not only creation,” says the Apostle, *“but we ourselves.”* What is true of creation, is true also of us. In this way, Paul describes the travail, the conflict, the warfare we’re hit with in our own lives.

The travail of creation, we can easily see that. Who doesn’t see damage of the wildfire or the flood, the devastation of the riot or the war, the violence and thievery of the mob or the thug? Who doesn’t see the torn marriage or the broken family, the person taken up in addiction?

It is also we ourselves. It is in us: **For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.** ²³ **And not only the creation, but we ourselves.**
[Romans 8:23]

Thus Paul describes the Christian life, the daily life of each of us—a life of groaning daily in the travail of fallen creation and fallen man. Even as those washed in the water and Word of Baptism, as those justified by the voice of Jesus, we still groan in pain while in our sinful flesh.

So our life, we might say, is on two tracks.

There is the life of being justified by Jesus, of being clothed in his righteousness, of living under grace and belonging to the living God—this is our life of faith.

At the same time, on the other track, our life of flesh, of living in sin, of trying to justify ourselves but not being able to, of trying to control things and people around us, but finding things always breaking down and tearing apart. But we live both at the same time—life of faith and life of flesh—so that we experience our daily existence as a fight, a conflict.

How do we resolve this?

We don't. We will live in our sinful flesh until the day of our earthly death, or until our Lord comes again, whichever comes first. But our sinful flesh will remain what it is, sinful. We can't make it holy; we can't put it on a track to be what it is not; we can't improve ourselves out of it; the old sinful flesh remains what it is.

So we daily repent of it. We daily put it to death, drowning it in the promise of Baptism, so that, daily, the life of faith, the new heart created by the Holy Spirit, is raised up to live before God in the righteousness of Jesus.

But this does leave us in the conflict, the groanings of pain, as Paul describes it.

The devil and his demons, they offer us a way out of this daily conflict. They put before us the temptation to make ourselves better by the Law, the temptation to daily improve so that we whip the old sinful flesh into shape to make it to be good and righteous.

This is the deadly temptation. For the old man of sin, he remains just what he is. And the Law of God cannot be used to make the old man of sin holy, for what the Law does when it confronts the old man of sin is, it doesn't make him holy, it kills him.

The Law judges the flesh, it speaks condemnation, it covers with shame, it kills; it does not ever bring health or life. The most we can do with the Law to straighten out the old sinful flesh is, to try to keep the flesh under outward control.

The Law can outwardly constrain. So that, though my flesh is sinful and I do not, then, love my neighbor as myself, nevertheless, because of the constraint of the Law I hold back on the outward damage I would do if the Law had not been there. It's a curb.

But this is a miserable way to go through life, trying to have life by the Law. ***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,*** says Paul.

Yet, at the same time, in our life of faith, we rejoice. From the cleansed heart, it's joy and delight, it's anticipating the life we await, but which now belongs to us by faith, it's looking forward in the true hope of the redemption of our bodies, where we will not be tormented by the devil, we will not live in any guilt, we will have no fear or despair, our shame will have been removed and we will stand before God in the honor of his Son, an honor which we have now by faith, but will have in eternity by everything we see and experience with our bodies.

But, while we wait, it is, as Paul says, groaning inwardly, as we live our life in the sinful flesh and at the same time our life of faith. And we don't know how to resolve the conflict.

But our Lord does. He daily brings us to repentance, putting to death the old man of sin with the Law, and daily makes us alive in his righteousness, keeping us in the promise of Baptism.

We go through this not alone.

This is the Lord's work from start to finish. He speaks his Law, he speaks his Gospel. He convicts of sin, he releases from sin and guilt. He knows our weakness even better than we do ourselves, and he leaves us never alone. He knows our eyes see only the fallen creation around us and our own sin and failure, and he speaks to us the Word of Gospel, planting in us the hope by which we are saved, the true hope of all sins forgiven by Christ Jesus and life everlasting for all those who belong to him.

In keeping us in this hope, in pulling us back from the groanings of all creation, our Lord leaves us never alone. Romans 8:27:

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. ²⁷ And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

The Holy Spirit, who was there with the Father and the Son at the creation of the world, who knows the groanings in pain of all creation since the fall into sin, who brought you to Baptism and gave himself to you in the holy Name, who knows your sin and mine even more deeply than we ourselves do, who knows that we can in no way make ourselves holy or bring any of righteousness with the Law, but who knows that our sinful flesh is consigned to death under the Law, the Holy Spirit, who loves us with a love we cannot even express with words and who makes himself known to us as the Holy Spirit in that he is about the work of making us holy, who knows the groanings of our spirits, who proceeds to us from the Father and the Son as gift, this Holy Spirit, he takes our groanings and our longings, our weaknesses and our desire to live always in the true hope of redemption of our bodies, and he takes them up into his intercession as he intercedes for us and for all the saints, according to the will of God.

We don't even know what to pray for as we should.

We pray with the voice of faith, we pray with the true hope of Christ Jesus, and yet even that prayer is spoken also from our sinful flesh, for we live at the same time in our life of faith and in our life of flesh.

But this prayer, this groaning made from weakness, it is taken up by the Holy Spirit who has made himself one with us, who names us as his temples where he is pleased to dwell, the Holy Spirit who makes us holy by forgiving all sin and cleansing all guilt in the Word of Gospel, this Holy Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for our words.

And his intercession is heard.

He pleads before the Father our innocence by the blood of Jesus. He sees our separation from God and our division from one another, and he pleads before the Father our unity with God and our oneness with each other by the blood of Jesus given to bring us into communion with God and with each other.

Knowing the weakness of our flesh, and knowing that God the Son became flesh along with us and took our sin upon himself, the Holy Spirit comforts us by justifying us before the Father in Heaven and interceding that we be kept with hearts of faith.

So we pray, O Holy Spirit bestowed upon us in Baptism, Holy Spirit, who makes us holy by your gifts, O Holy Spirit, intercede for us, and keep us in the true hope of the redemption of the body.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.