

“Of Groans...and the Spirit”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for May 24th 2015 (Pentecost Sunday)
by Foster Freed

Romans 8: 18-27

Let's begin by getting our bearings: our bearings on this festival day, this day of Pentecost.

It has its roots...this festival...it has its ancient roots more than a thousand years before the coming of Christ: it has its roots in a Jewish festival known as Shavuot, a festival which—coming 50 days on the heels of Passover—celebrates the giving of the law, the giving of the commandments, to Moses on Mount Sinai. And because Shavuot falls 50 days after Passover, it came to be known in the Greek speaking Jewish world as Pentecost, meaning feast of the 50th day. Just as Easter is built on the foundation of the Jewish Passover, the Christian Pentecost is built on the foundation of the Jewish Pentecost. The difference between the Jewish and Christian versions of the feast is that the one celebrates the giving of the commandments whereas the other celebrates the giving of the Holy Spirit. That's the heart of the matter...at least when viewed from the perspective of Christianity's Jewish roots. But, of course, there's more.

Pentecost...to be properly understood...must also be pondered from the perspective of the experience those first disciples underwent, starting with Jesus' arrest on Good Friday. Trust me: for that rag-tag assortment of fiends, friends and frauds, there was nothing good about that particular day, a day that saw the worst of them betray him, and the best of them abandon him. The devastation of that day gave way two days later to the unsettling elation of Easter: elation which, according to the chronology in Luke's Gospel and the book Acts, lasted a full forty days. As I explained to the children last Sunday that elation would have been tempered on that fortieth day, a day we now mark as the Feast of the Ascension: and what a bittersweet feast that truly is, marking what they would have experienced as Christ's second disappearance from their midst. The next ten days must have been filled with deep uncertainty, uncertainty that gives way to its opposite with the gift of the Pentecostal Spirit. Think of it this way.

When we, in the words of our United Church Creed, claim that “we are not alone, we live in God's world”...we affirm our debt to God as Creator: the one who fashioned our world, shaped our frame, and filled us with the breath of life. Furthermore, when we claim “we are not alone, we live in God's world:”...we also affirm our debt to God as Saviour: our debt to the One who—in Christ—paid a house-call to our troubled world. But finally, and on this Pentecost Sunday most notably, to claim that “we are not alone, we live in God's world” is also to insist that we live in a world over which the Spirit hovers, a world that continues to be sustained, loved and at times challenged through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, a

Spirit that takes a special interest in the integrity of Christian witness. Thus this day is marked as a true day for celebration...for rejoicing...just a tiny notch beneath Christmas and Easter in the Christian pantheon of feast days. A defining feast! A momentous feast! A joyful feast! A feast that thereby raises, at least for me, one rather basic question on this particular morning.

Why in the world would anyone—let alone those savvy enough to plan the lectionary readings for this day—why would anyone in their right mind deem it appropriate, on so joyful and auspicious occasion to read that dour, seemingly morbid text from the Apostle Paul?

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves. The whole creation! Groaning! Groaning in labour pains! And not only the creation, but we ourselves! We ourselves! Groaning! Groaning...like a woman in labour.

Happy Pentecost...you miserable people! A happy Pentecost to you all!

* * * * *

Permit me...permit me to begin by pulling back, for a moment, from this particular text, indeed from this particular letter: the one we know as Paul's letter to the Romans. Before asking why such a text, such a seemingly sombre text, might be offered to us as food for contemplation on Pentecost Sunday, let's ask a more basic question, namely: why one would we read **anything** of Paul's as part of a Pentecost feast.

In truth, our Protestant reading of Paul's letters tends to be deeply coloured by the impact those letters—especially Romans and Galatians—had on Martin Luther, when he was struggling to make sense of his life as an Augustinian monk. Through his wrestling with Paul's writings, Luther came to the conclusion that the heart of the Gospel was something Luther came to speak of as "justification" by faith through grace. In other words, the heart of Luther's Gospel focused upon what God had accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus. That interpretation tends to loom large over all of our Protestant readings of Paul, so that we tend to pay extra attention when Paul speaks of law and grace, of Christ's atoning sacrifice, of being made righteous through the gift of what happened to Jesus on the Cross. The problem being...well, the problem being that we can thereby fail to notice all kinds of other things taking place in Paul's writings, above all the fact that Paul is deeply aware of the work of the Spirit. That's why I often say that the Holy Spirit is nowhere to be found in the writings of Paul until you start to look; then—lo and behold!—you quickly come to the realization that the Holy Spirit is everywhere in the writings of Paul. That's why it would be next to impossible to not invite Paul to be part of an occasion such as this. But why this text? Why this text with its depiction of a world in travail, of a world in heavy, agonizing labour?

Well: here I can only answer in a personal way. Here, I can only speak of my own experience, experience which leads me to conclude that we are unlikely to speak appropriately of the work of the Spirit, until we have clarity as to what it does **not** mean for the Spirit to be in our midst. And yes, from where I stand, the defining verses are the ones in which Paul speaks about the plight in which creation—including even Christian creatures—still find themselves.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now, and not only the creation, but we ourselves...

...let's make certain we give that "we ourselves" the full weight it deserves!...

*...the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now, and 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.* No one gets out of here unscathed. Indeed: no one gets out of here alive. We know that. Contemporary culture certainly knows that. And the good news...the good news is that even the Apostle knows that. There is, you see, no need for us to pretend otherwise.

* * * *

A few days ago...a few days ago a friend of mine lost one of his closest friends. He was devastated by the loss. Here's what he wrote on Facebook.

"My friend died today. He was a gentle, excellent man who helped me a great deal. He was quiet and gentle. He rarely made a scene and lived a small life. I miss him a great deal." And then he adds in capital letters: "I HATE THE FACT THAT WE ALL DIE!" I like the honesty of that sentiment...the willingness to name the inevitability of death as a raw wound...as an essential component to the things over which we groan. At its best, there is something about this life—the experiences we cherish, the people we come to adore, the beauty we are privileged to behold—there is something about this life that makes us always yearn for more...and always experience deep sadness when, like my friend, we are reminded of our shared mortality.

A few days after reading that Facebook post, I learned of a death that cut even closer to home. This Tuesday I plan to attend a memorial service up in Parksville. The service will be held for a 46 year old man I got to know through the Knox congregation; 46 years old leaving behind a 12 year old son and a 10 year old daughter. Diagnosed just before Christmas with stage 4 colon cancer...gone less than 6 months later. A rather stark testimony to the fact that while it is most certainly the case that life is beautiful...it is also the case that life is far from fair. And here's the thing.

As a community that insists—and as a Christian faith community we most certainly **do** insist—that God is alive, that Christ is alive, that God’s Spirit is here and now in our midst...

...as a community intent on making just such a claim, it behoves us—even on a festive day such as this one, perhaps especially on a festive day—it behoves us to be keenly aware of the world in which we live, the world in which and for which we make such bold claims. You see: it’s not just that the Christian is called to say “no” to the cynical resignation that is such a commonplace facet of modern life...it’s that we are called to say that “no” without putting our heads in the sand. I am convinced that if our Christian witness—in the midst of a cynical culture—is to have even a shred of credibility, it cannot be grounded in the pretence that the world is other than what we all know it to be. Which is why Paul in his proclamation of the Spirit...no less than we ourselves in our celebration of the Spirit...really have no choice but to find ourselves speaking, at the end of the day, in terms of our shared “hope”...our shared “expectation” that God is not done with us yet. Our shared hope that there is more to this life than these frail eyes of flesh are capable of seeing!

Such hope should never be a matter of escapism! God forbid. Nor should such hope prompt us to turn our backs on the world while we hand the keys to the car back to God. But such hope...such hope in the ongoing ministry of God’s Spirit...

...such hope is what makes it possible for us to see the world with slanted eyes...with a capacity to notice the grandeur in each fragile leaf, the mystery inside every grain of sand, the hint of the eternal in every human soul. Thereby renewing our trust in the God who fashioned us in the beginning...who loved and still loves us in Christ...who stubbornly stands by us through the Spirit. To know in our bones that this God is far from done with us! And yes: to affirm—to affirm with St. Paul—that while it may be true that creation itself groans as in labour, while it may be true that we ourselves are no strangers to creation’s travails, to nevertheless be able to affirm that these present sufferings do not even begin to compare, with the goodness, graciousness and glory we have been promised as we come fully to share the life of Jesus Christ.

This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ!