Transcription of sermon

St. Helen’s

July 19, 2020

Romans 8: 12-25

You may remember last week that we were thinking about how Paul was facing some existential crises that had arisen in his time. There was some reason to think that Christianity might disappear in warring groups— those who were of Jewish background pitted against those who were of non-Jewish background—unable to get along with each other. Paul was also concerned that the persecution by the Roman Empire might end the Christian faith. And of course Paul was becoming aware of what a faithless Christian he himself was. You'll notice in the letters proceeding Romans that he's always busy telling everybody else how they should behave and get along in the congregations, but at this point Paul has discovered that that same crisis is within himself as well as in the external world.

In the first portion of chapter eight that we read last week, Paul resolves that crisis by saying that not only the external world but his own internal world of his own motivations are all caught up in the resurrection of Christ. And if his own ambivalence, which he calls flesh— that's what he means when he uses the word “flesh”—his own selfishness—when that is caught up in the resurrection of Christ, then all is well. And now in this second section from chapter eight that were reading today, Paul begins to explain—and it's very helpful for us—how that resurrection takes place in us.

We, of course, are in the same situation as Paul. We're facing some existential crises. We're facing the crisis of Covid. How long is that going to go on for​? What could happen in the future? We're facing the looming crisis of possible climate collapse and like Paul there's crises within ourselves—in our sense that we are helpless and in our sense that we've contributed to these crises. So we're really in a very similar situation to that in which Paul was. Paul has some things to say about how we experience the resurrection which takes all those concerns and brings them into God's presence and purifies it all.

The way he thinks that happens is very relevant to us.

The way he goes about explaining that is to say that you and I are God's family. And he's quite specific about that. You and I are sons and daughters of God. We are sisters and brothers of Jesus. We are intimate family. And while he's thinking about the nature of family, he draws on an experience that was very common in the ancient world but really quite rare, sadly, in our world. There were no hospitals in the ancient world. So when someone is about to give birth everybody knows it. Everybody hears the labor pains. Everybody hears the groaning. Everybody hears the fear in the mother who is about to give birth and her struggle, which to her often enough I expect, felt like approaching death. That was a common experience that everybody had in the ancient world. And so when Paul begins to use that as an image of how it is that we are family of God, brothers and sisters of Christ, everybody knew exactly what he was talking about. Because as the public around the tent are hearing the agonizing groans of the woman about to give birth, everybody is on tiptoe in the expectation that momentarily a child will be born into the world and the pain will be over.

Paul's image applies so well to us. Paul says that the anxiety in our world is the groaning of labor pains.

And fascinatingly, Paul dares appliy that image to creation. He talks about creation groaning in waiting for the daughters and sons of God to be revealed. He talks about the whole creation being in labor pains. It's really quite a remarkable image and it fits our time perfectly.

Our natural world, as we all know, is groaning. The normal temptation, which Paul has said earlier, is to fear, but as Paul said, we're not being called back into slavery to fear. Our normal temptation is to be afraid of what lies ahead, but Paul says not to be afraid of what's going on in nature, not to be afraid of that, but to understand it as labor pains. The crisis is approaching us, the possibility of climate collapse, and Paul says to understand that as labor pains that are preparatory to giving birth to great joy. He says the creation is waiting eagerly for the revealing of the daughters and sons of God.

 What that means in our time is that you and I are the ones creation is waiting for. It's fascinating that only at this single point in human history is this possible. We are he ones who can take the action to save the planet—that could never have happened before our time. But it happens in our time, and just as our Lord died on the cross to save the whole cosmos, so there are sacrifices we're being called to make— changes in our society—that will result in the salvation of this planet.

I'm sure Paul didn't foresee these kind of details, but you realize Paul is saying that through the labor pains of our anxiety about the future, is born the possibility of our being sisters and brothers of Christ and making those sacrifices as Christ did, and giving joy and hope for the future of the planet. That's really quite remarkable.

You see how, when that happens, that becomes our resurrection? I don't think there's anything the human race could be more proud of at this point in history than making those changes because we care not only for our future, but we will be care for all the creatures great and small around the planet. That would be our resurrection. Paul is saying, “Do not be swamped by fear, but interpret that crisis as the groaning of your new birth and the birth of the planet.”

And then Paul talks about the groaning inside ourselves. There are labor pains in us. He talks about us groaning, “Abba Father!” It's the cry for hope, the cry for help, the cry of feeling we can't do it, we're not strong enough to make the political decisions. We're not committed enough in our own selves. Just like Paul we turn our vision inward and say, “But hold on, we're not really very faithful Christians.” Paul said, “I don't do the things I want to do and I do the things I don't want to do.” That's exactly us. And Paul says when we cry out to God sometimes wordlessly, we don't have to put it into words. “If only I were otherwise, if only this was different!” Paul says that's our groaning of labor pains inside ourselves and those labor pains are the guarantee that we have the spirit of God in us. Otherwise, we wouldn't care that we weren't strong enough or committed enough. It's the fact that we care that we're not strong enough, and that we care that we're not committed enough, that is the proof that we are already daughters and sons of God and brothers sisters of Christ.

It's quite an extraordinary point that Paul makes. He says, using imagery from his time, that that groaning in us—that we could be different than we are—that groaning is the first crop of the harvest and much more harvest is to come. What he's saying is we are not to be slaves to fear and failure about ourselves—we are in fact to think of ourselves as women giving birth to new joy and the very longing that we could be different is the guarantee of that joy.

That of course is our experience of the resurrection. If we weren't inspired by the Spirit, we wouldn't have those longings. That's the guarantee of the Spirit's power through the risen Christ, known to us in the form of Spirit now.

But that power is the power behind the universe and that all is well.

So how do we put that trust in resurrection into practice? We were thinking last week about making little surreptitious signs of the cross when you hear about more covid infections and death, and we care for those people, we care for the world, for the planet, and we care and love ourselves because we need to be loved so much.

How do we put this resurrection into practice?

A suggestion. The people who are going to suffer most from covid are the people who have the least resources. People who live in the poorest parts of the world and in the poorest parts of our country are likely to be the people who suffer most. The question about whether we are daughters and sons of God brothers and sisters of Christ, is “Do we love them?” And so my suggestion is that when you are in a conversation, you might at some point find a way to say “Wouldn't it be wonderful to do more for those who are suffering most?” And that suggests for your listener, your conversation partner—or perhaps it's a conversation by email or Zoom—you somewhere find a place to insert that thought into the conversation. That allows other people— and you may be surprised how many of them are—who are also wondering the same things and who had never thought that it's an opportunity to begin to love those we don't even know.

And there astonishingly the resurrection happens.

Or maybe you insert into the conversation, “Wouldn't it be wonderful if our society could make the changes necessary to ensure that the climate begins to go back to normal and all is safe!” You find a way, just a little way, of inserting that into the conversation. Or sometimes it's simply a matter of being silent at a certain place in the conversation. But however you do it you find yourself challenging the normal perceptions of society. That's what Paul means when he talks about the flesh. He means the normal assumptions of society, which are “We're first, our country is first, our part of society is first, my needs are first, I want to keep my skin safe.” Paul says that's flesh. When you put your effort behind that priority, everything dies. Paul says it's the flesh that dies, and he's absolutely right. But we are the resurrected people and we are able to insert into conversations—into our lives—by hints and by attitudes and sometimes by silences—that that's not what drives us. We're not driven by that selfishness. And right there the resurrection is beginning to happen in us!

You and I find little ways or big ways of claiming the resurrection and saying we are actually called to care for the poorest amid covid, and that we are actually called to make the changes—and they will involve sacrifices—to make our world safe. And you and I are called to actually sacrifice that part inside ourselves that wants to hide behind the fear and do nothing.

The fact that we care about it is the proof, Paul says, that we are indeed part of the family of God. And if we're part of the family of God, then we trust absolutely in the resurrection.

At the end of this passage Paul talks about nature of hope and he says we live in that hope. The whole point of hope is that the resurrection isn't complete yet. But you and I live in constant expectation that in whatever way it may be, God's sacrificial love and power is what—in the past, the present, and the future—forever undergirds the universe and we know we're all part of that. In that knowledge we have the strength to act out the resurrection in our conversations with others.

That hope is what the world needs and you and I can provide it. Thanks be to God through the resurrection of his son Jesus Christ.

Harold Munn.