

Sermon—February 19, 2017  
“Futurity, not Futility”  
Romans 8: 18-25

We live in the midst of earth’s futility, but in light of heaven’s futurity. (Yes, “futurity” is a real word meaning “the state of being futuristic.”) Christians are futuristic in their outlook.

As we look around us—at the cycle of birth and death; at the comings and goings of human political power; at the throwing away of behavioral standards that once had the consensus of being absolutes—it’s easy to agree with Paul’s statement in today’s Epistle that “the creation was subjected to futility.” (Romans 8:20)

It appears to us that nothing seems permanent or meaningful in today’s world. The future also seems unreal—existing only in our dreams and occasional nightmares. As we look around in the present, we feel as though life is slipping away from us. The past appears to us as a fantasy of an ideal world where everything seems to have its place. We become depressed as our certainty and familiarity with life as we know it fades and evaporates. However, if we believe only in what we see, our spiritual vision becomes impaired.

Yet we must remember that this is God’s world—not something we created for our comfort and convenience. It’s a world created not by physical power, but spiritual power. There is more to this world than what we perceive with our physical senses.

Paul writes this section of Romans with his spiritual perception, which grasps reality beyond his immediate physical circumstances. As we grow in our Christian life, we should also begin perceiving more than what is physically present.

In his spiritual perception, Paul sees his visible circumstances in a new perspective.

Thus he writes, “The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (Romans 8:18) Thus Paul sees visible suffering—much of which seems to be meaningless—in light of a background which features the revelation of heavenly glory. Thus, there is heavenly futurity in the midst of earthly futility!

However, Paul is no Pollyanna. He takes a realistic view of his present afflictions as well as the suffering in the world as a whole. Paul sees our suffering as an integral part of a process featuring Christ’s glorification. Thus Paul relates it to the cross which in the eyes of the Apostle John is Christ’s glorification. (John 13:31-33) Paul sees himself as a part of God’s creation anticipating the revealing of those who truly belong to God. Here the “revealing of the sons of God” (Romans 8:19) does not refer merely to males, but to

all those whose hearts are truly dedicated to God.

Simeon's prophecy to Mary and Joseph concerning the infant Jesus is relevant at this point. This prophecy stated that through Jesus, "the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."(Luke 2:35) Thus, those who are inwardly dedicated to God would become known, but this revealing would entail suffering as Simeon tells Mary that "a sword would pierce (her) own soul also."(Luke 2:35)

We modern people try to avoid suffering and pain at all costs. We spend millions on pain killers, but suffering is the great sifter of life. It has the effect of stripping away all our self-deceptions and pretensions and getting us down to what is essential for a rich, meaningful life. Suffering confronts us with a distinct choice between self-pity leading us to isolation and despair and self-sacrifice leading us to depths of intimate compassion toward those we encounter.

Jesus chose the second course. The self-sacrifice of the cross leads to the glory of the Resurrection, not just for Jesus, but also for us as we experience the depths of His love and compassion both within and beyond this life.

In our daily lives, our suffering can be converted into an offering of self to God. This self-sacrifice nurtures the fruit of Christ's resurrection as its awareness grows into our daily lives. This fruit manifests itself as physical and emotional healing for ourselves and others. It is characterized by a deeper compassion for the suffering of others as we become bearers of Christ's immediate presence in situations of great human need.

With this emphasis on the distinctive role of suffering in God's plan for Christ's glorification, let's look at how this plan unfolds for us.

First, we need to recognize that our own pain and suffering is not unique to each one of us, but an integral part of the suffering undergone by creation as a whole. Paul makes this intriguing statement in today's Epistle. "The creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of Him who subjected it in hope."(Romans 8:20)

Paul speaks here of the curse placed upon the whole creation by the sin and fall of Adam who represents all of humankind. (Genesis 3:14-19) What's intriguing about this statement is the last part of it. Creation is subjected to futility by the will of God "who subjected it in hope." Hope embraces futility lifting us out of futility! Paul goes on to spell out this hope that "creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God."(Romans 8:20)

In other words, God allows His creation to suffer in the hope that this suffering will launch a process of repentance (of turning to God) liberating us from the fear of death. This liberation enables us to reach the full potential of our God-given lives. This great deliverance of us was launched from a Roman cross planted on a hill outside Jerusalem.

God in the flesh became a crucified human being and defeated death, not only for Jesus, but also for us. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, an unprecedented dimension of life was introduced into the entire creation transforming all of its components—humans, animals, plants, even minerals and the basic chemical elements permeating all of creation. This great transformation, which began on Calvary, is going on at this very moment and will continue into the future until Christ returns to bring all things to their completion.

Look at the scriptural evidence for this transformation. Isaiah (11:6) sees the Heavenly Kingdom manifested when the wolf dwells with the lamb and the leopard lies down with the kid. John's vision in Revelation (21:1) celebrates a new heaven and earth. Even the chemical elements comprising air are included as we are caught up to meet Christ in the air. (I Thessalonians 4:17)

Thus God's redemption plans are not limited to human beings. The effects of Christ's sacrifice on the cross touch the whole environment as it becomes transformed to be appropriate for this new heaven and earth. When the people of God come into the fullness of our redemption as a result of the cross, so also the creation will be liberated and restored to full untainted perfection.

The process of this redemption is characterized both for Christians and creation by groaning and anticipation.

This groaning is not childish moaning and selfish grumbling. It is something much deeper than that. First, it is genuine sorrow over our separation from God caused by the human race's fall into sin. This groaning mourns our lost God-given potential. It is an awareness of our physical and spiritual limitations coupled with anticipation that we will be freed from all these hindrances. It is an expression of repentance permeating all of creation.

Paul's vision of the whole creation "groaning in travail" is not only sorrow over our past fall into sin, but it is also a picture of us giving birth. There is the pain of labor, but there is also the anticipation of new life coming forth.

For those who interpret their suffering in light of Christ's suffering on the cross, pain assumes a rich dimension of meaning when it is seen as the prelude to Christ's liberation of us as we reach our full potential as people.

How do we apply this insight as we try to live our daily life as believers? For those of us with physical limitations which are causes for groaning, we should groan not so much from dissatisfaction with our present state, but from the perspective that in the new heaven and earth, we will be equipped with new bodies.(I Corinthians 15:44) This is the groaning anticipating birth of our spiritual bodies.

This doesn't preclude hope for healing in this life because Paul reminds us that believers possess "the first fruits of the Spirit"(Romans 8:23) among which healing is included. Whenever a healing takes place in our lives, we receive a foretaste of what will

be normative in the new heaven and earth where Revelation (21:4) reminds us that “death will be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.”

The bottom line of this sermon is that believers are called to live in futurity, not futility. At the heart of Christian belief is an anticipation that the future rests in God’s hands and that it will be better than the present.

Paul strongly reminds us at the end of today’s Epistle that we not only “groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies,” but that we are also motivated by the hope that we were saved. (Romans 8:23-24)

We believe as Christians that the human situation is not hopeless. Life is not a despairing wait for the inevitable results of sin, but an eager anticipation of liberation, a renovation, a re-creation wrought by God.

A Christian therefore waits not for death, but for life. This is the content of our hope which is still unseen and futuristic, but for which we “wait with patience.”(Romans 8:25) It is a patience characterized by “eager longing”. (Romans 8:19)

Here the Greek words suggest a poignant picture of a person scanning the horizon anticipating the breaking of dawn.

There is much groaning today. Much of it is focused on self-pity. Yet believing Christians cry out with a different kind of groaning characterized by anticipation of being reborn into a new heaven and earth. It is a groaning centered in hope rather than despair.

I urge you today to listen to the inarticulate groaning within yourselves. Does it express futility or futurity? The groans of futility lead you to lonely despair. The groans of futurity lead you to Jesus the Christ.

It is time to renounce our obsession with futility and embrace with unseeing hope the futurity of a rich intimacy with Jesus Christ. He comes to you in scriptural word and sacrament as well as the give and take of daily life. Embrace Jesus! With Him, your future is assured!