

Reflection
Psalm 29
Romans 8: 12-17
May 26, 2024
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Title: IN THIS TOGETHER

Prayer: Holy One, thank you for the freedom we have to gather, to explore your word and to be in your presence. Gift us with ears to hear your message for us today, and with open hearts to receive it. Amen.

The message that kept coming up for me when reflecting on these passages was “We’re in this together.” You and I – we are in this together: the Christian life is not a personal and private relationship with God. We are in this together. So is God. God and us – we are in this together. Jews and Christians ... and all faith traditions – we are in this together.

In what?

We are in this thing called life. We are in this desire for wholeness, for joy, for peace, for beauty, for health. We are in this together.

And, what is it about the texts that got me thinking this way?

One line in the Romans passage when Paul says “When we cry ‘abba’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”

‘That very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit.’

We are in this together.

Do the texts support this idea? Let’s find out.

Let’s start with Romans. And, to start with Romans we have to start with Paul.

Does anyone else find Paul to be a roller coaster ride? Sometimes he makes sense to me and other times I’m left scratching my head. There is so much to know about the time

in which all these books of the bible were written, and few of us have the time or brain space or brilliance to remember and absorb and know it all. Besides that, we're trying to layer these teachings on our world experience today – which is a different environment.

And, besides that, when we read the epistles, the letters – like Romans – we are in fact reading someone else's mail, so how do we expect to truly understand the context anyway?!

I'm no expert but I am slowly learning (over the last 20 years) that when Paul was travelling and evangelizing there were other folks doing the same – but not necessarily spreading the same message Paul was ... hence Paul's passionate enthusiasm perhaps. The Roman Empire was polytheistic – they recognized and worshipped multiple gods and goddesses. There was a broad range of practices and beliefs going on, all influencing and forming each other. They were lumped together as paganism. All this would have influenced the soon-to-be-but-not-yet Christian faith and Judaism as well. For Paul, being saved didn't mean to become Christian, it meant to come into God's kingdom.

When Paul was embarking on his mission Christianity didn't yet exist as a separate religion; so Paul was preaching to not only the Gentiles, but also to both Jews who believed that Jesus, as the Christ, had ushered in the Messianic age; and Jews that did not believe this.

Paul believed that the Kingdom was going to arrive in his own lifetime so it's HIGHLY unlikely that he had any intention of starting a new religion.

The more Jewish/Christian scholars I read, the more evident it is that Paul wasn't anti-Jewish – he most likely still strongly identified with many Jewish practices having been a Pharisee and a scholar himself.

Jewish Scholar Paula Fredricksen says that “Paul lived in a world full of gods.” She says “as Christ's apostle, Paul taught that pagans did not have to become Jews (meaning get circumcised); but they did have to commit to worshiping Israel's god alone – to live according to some – not all – Jewish law.”

And maybe we can cut Paul some slack. I mean he's writing in the 50s and the first gospel wasn't written down until the 70s or so; so Paul really is at the forefront of

spreading the news. Maybe we can more readily accept all his fervor and excitement; and forgive him for some of his absolute or clunky messaging.

I was reading what came before today's text to see what he had been talking about ... and ran into this tongue twister in Chapter 7 (15-19): ¹⁵I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.

Gee, thanks, Paul!

Our passage today begins with "So then" which means it's a conclusion of what Paul had already been saying. And, the tongue twister tells us that Paul was talking about sin dwelling in us; and gaining some freedom from sin and death; and that that comes with adopting a new life in Christ – which means life in/with the Spirit.

And he keeps this thread of the difference between flesh and spirit going through our passage today.

It's the flesh that causes us to stumble. He wants us to put to death the deeds of the flesh by living in the Spirit.

Remember a few weeks ago – or was it a few months ago now – we talked a little bit about sin and explored the Hebrew word Khata which basically means to fail or miss the mark? We talked about sin as possibly being a failure to love God and others by not treating them with the honour they deserve.

Sin is the stuff we do or don't do, not who we are as a created child of God. Sin is what repentance is all about. Once we see it we can change; we can carve a new way.

Sin might be deliberate or purposeful; it might be violence or rage, greed, lust, lying, theft. Sin might be pride, envy, avoidance.

We might not be deliberate in it. We might not know we're doing something wrong; or we might be doing something wrong but think that we're in the right – we think our bad decisions are good ones. Sin could be our ability to deceive ourselves or act for our own good.

All this happens as we “live by the flesh.” And – spoiler alert – we have to live by the flesh – we’re human after all. But, we aren’t just flesh. We are also spirit – and the more we can live by the Spirit the more chance there is of helping to usher in God’s kingdom.

And, good news – we don’t figure this out on our own. We are in this together!

It’s our job together – our spirit and God’s spirit.

Paul talks about us as children of God; receiving the Spirit by adoption; being heirs of God, that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit – we are in this together! All the way.

Did you also catch another way we’re in this together? Near the very end ... if we are children then we are heirs – heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. So ... Paul says “we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.”

Do I hear car tires coming to a screeching halt? Wait a second. We’re in this for the suffering too? Maybe I need to rethink this.

Just as we look before the text to see what’s going on, we also look at what comes after. Later in chapter eight Paul says (vs 18 and 22) “I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us ... we know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now...”

This kind of phrase ... the suffering now and the glory to come ... is problematic for me. I don’t believe that we are supposed to suffer, suffer, suffer while we’re here on earth and then PRESTO, as soon as we die we’re in paradise.

Nor do I believe that’s what Paul was saying ... although I could be wrong.

Paul thinks God’s kingdom is imminent. And in God’s kingdom all war and strife shall cease, there is no need, there is no suffering.

In my hopeful heart I think “what’s stopping us from getting there right now?”

Suffering with Christ doesn’t mean walking up a hill with a cross on our back; suffering with Christ means looking and seeing and feeling the pain of the world and

trying to alleviate it. And, if we don't have the resources to march or donate then we can pray. We can feel. We can let ourselves be hurt by the suffering of the world, so that it affects us, it changes us.

Suffering with Christ doesn't mean turning off the news when it's bad news. It doesn't mean turning our heads and pretending the person sleeping on the street isn't there. It doesn't mean assuming someone else will fight the good fight. It doesn't mean numbing our hearts to the pain of the world.

Suffering with Christ means looking straight at malice and misfortune and injustice. It means taking it into our hearts and assessing what – if anything – we can do in each particular instance, and then trying to do that. Suffering with Christ means feeling something so we are moved to act; it means sharing with God what we see and asking to be instruments in its relief.

If we follow the lessons and stories of Jesus then suffering is not an option. It's not something we can refuse. That's not to say we are to be consumed by it. Definitely not. It just means watching, seeing, feeling and doing something whether it's praying, talking to a friend, posing a question, marching, feeding, advocating. Some kind of action – nothing is too big and nothing is too small.

We can find joy in the suffering and we can even find suffering in the joy. These two things are not mutually exclusive.

And ... can you guess? We are not alone in this. We are in this together: the very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit.

As our anthem today says "the same power that moves mountains when it speaks, the same power that can calm a raging sea; lives in us.

Which, happy coincidence, brings us to Psalm 29 – a divine Kingship psalm. A psalm that reminds us that God is huge, God is powerful, God can do anything. No matter how loud or wild nature can be – like a raging sea or a wild fire or a tornado – God is greater.

So, while on this journey with Christ, we are also comforted and blessed by this great power of God. And, thank goodness because some days it is a tough journey and we don't feel prepared.

But, you and I – we are in this together.

God and us – we are in this together.

All faith traditions ... are in this together.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.