



Saint John United Methodist Church
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Message for May 30, 2021
“Emerging: Hope for Eternity”
Speaker: Pastor Tom Grieb
Scripture: Romans 8:18-28

Christ Knocking at the Door

You probably recognize this painting. It is Holman Hunt’s famous *Christ Standing at the Door Knocking*. It is displayed in churches all over the world.

It is based upon that great passage from Revelation 3:20, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and that person with me.”

The story is told of a father and his son looking at the picture when the father asked his son, “I wonder why they don’t let him in?” After thinking about it, the boy replied, “I bet they are down in the basement and they can’t hear him knocking.”

How perceptive.

What keeps you from heeding Christ’s knock upon the door of your heart? It very well may be that the circumstances you face keep you from welcoming him as you should. It may be that the challenges of life keep you more in the basement than you should be. You find yourself more down than up, and because of that have a hard time reaching beyond your circumstances to welcome Christ into your life.

Regardless, Jesus wants to be involved. He offers hope for this life and the next. Let’s read about that now as we turn to God’s word. Today we read Romans 8:18-28.

Romans 8:18-28

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. ²⁷ And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who¹ have been called according to his purpose.

Nobody Said It Would Be Easy

Nobody said it would be easy. We know from experience that life can be hard. We know that circumstances can get to us. They can weigh us down to no end if we let them. We are just now emerging from one of the most difficult circumstances in recent memory. The Covid-19 Pandemic has been something else. We are emerging though, for which we are eternally thankful.

We have learned a lot about ourselves. Hopefully, we have learned a lot about God and his every desire to see us through challenging times. I pray we have come to depend upon him more.

We have learned that we are not always able to control our circumstances. We try, but in the end, we realize we simply cannot. We have learned, or at least I hope we have, that we **can** control how we will deal with those circumstances.

Everybody deals with things differently, particularly when the going gets tough.

The Message of the Maples

You may be familiar with Edgar Jackson's, *The Message of the Maples*. Jackson is a well-known pastor and author. Some years ago, he suffered a severe stroke. His prognosis was pretty bleak. The stroke left him paralyzed on his right side and unable to talk.

After a while Jackson was able to regain his speech. Even so, he struggled to walk. Eventually, he and his wife, Estelle, moved to a farm outside Corinth, Vermont. It was there that a fellow by the name of Edward Ziegler came to visit him. Ziegler had his own set of problems and sought Jackson's counsel. Ziegler had read a few of Jackson's book and found them helpful.

As the two talked, they eventually headed outside where Jackson asked Ziegler to look at the maple trees that surrounded the field just outside Jackson's home. The trees had been planted years before to be used as fence posts for a barbed wire fence.

Jackson pointed out that some of the trees grew around the wire and became straight and tall. Others did not adjust so well to the barb wire and became twisted and deformed. Each tree handled the barb wire in different ways.

"Some people," Jackson explained, *"are like the trees that grew around the wire and went on with what they had to do. Other people are like those stunted and deformed trees. Their difficulties have ruined their lives and left them smaller, meaner, and unhappier."*

Jackson went on, *"If we are wise in handling our difficulties, we will be able to adjust to them and move on. Our lives will grow tall and straight, and we will live triumphantly."*

Hear what Jackson is trying to say. Life is a lot in how you deal with things.

I have found that entrusting all circumstances, big and small, the good and not so good to God always lands me at the place I need to be. It gives me the best chance to live life to the full, despite my circumstances. God stands to help us through whatever comes our way.

We talked last week about *“God’s love being poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”* We talked about that same Spirit *“walking alongside us”* to strengthen us in the mix of whatever we might be facing. The Holy Spirit is a Comforter, Counselor, Helper in and through all things, and that same Spirit stands to help us.

Not Worth Comparing with the Glory

Paul knew full well about that. He had experienced God’s support in so many ways. He longed for others to share in that help as well. Paul suffered in all sorts of ways yet remained above his suffering with the help and strength of the Holy Spirit. Paul had endured beatings, imprisonments, shipwrecks, and constant persecution. Through it all he emerged above it all. (cf. II Corinthians 11:16-33)

Paul was rightly convinced that God was Lord over this life and the next and took great solace in that. Paul’s confidence that God was with him in this world and the world to come buoyed him regardless of what the world threw at him. That is why Paul could write in Romans 8:18, *“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”*

Paul always had an eye toward heaven. He took a broad view. Paul was not just locked in on what was happening in the here and now but kept his gaze on eternity as well. In taking that longer view the immediate did not seem quite so weighty.

It is hard to find meaning if *“three score and ten”* is all there is to life.

Psalms 90:10 says, *“The length of our days is seventy years, or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow.”*

Ecclesiastes 2:22-23 says, *“What do people get for all the toil and anxious thoughts with which they labor under the sun? All their days, their work is pain and grief, even at night their minds are not at rest. This too is meaningless.”*

Our view is this: There is hope for this life and the next. While the present may not be perfect, better days lie ahead. Again, *“our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”*

Paul knew from experience that none of us gets through life without being challenged, and sometimes quite severely. Knowing that God is with us now and throughout all eternity gives us every reason to be hopeful.

To Live is Christ, To Die Is Gain

Paul writes in Philippians 1:21, *“For me to live is Christ, to die is gain.”* In that confidence, Paul was able to persevere with all courage and hope, and Christ would be exalted whether in life or in death.

My Wednesday evening small group is studying a wonderful book on the Sermon on the Mount called *What If Jesus Was Serious?* by Skye Jethani. Jethani offers the inspiring story of a Maryland slave who well before the Civil War exhibited that same sort of faith stance as that of the Apostle Paul.

The slave’s name was Jacob and he served under a hard taskmaster named Saunders. At regular intervals during the day, Jacob stopped his labor, rested quietly, and communed with God, which upset Saunders terribly.

While kneeling in the field to pray one day, Saunders approached Jacob and pointed a gun to his head. He ordered Jacob to stop praying and get back to work. Jacob finished his prayer and then invited Saunders to pull the trigger.

"Your loss will be my gain," he said. "I have two masters—master Jesus in heaven, and master Saunders on earth. I have a soul and a body; the body belongs to you and the soul belongs to Jesus."

Saunders was so shaken by Jacob's faith that he never touched him again.

That's a *"for me to live is Christ to die is gain"* disposition, if there ever was one. Taking the high view of heaven always lifts us above our circumstances and allows us to be strengthened in them.

We have every reason to be hopeful in this life and for the next. God will not abandon us now and certainly will not later.

The Spirit Helps Us in Our Weakness

Paul digs a bit deeper when it comes to God's work in meeting us at the very point of our need. He expresses it well for us when he writes, *"In the same way the Spirit helps us in our weakness."*

Sometimes things can get so bad we don't even know what, much less how to pray. It is then that the Spirit steps in to help us. *"We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express."* (Romans 8:26)

I get that way every once and a while. Things seem so overwhelming sometimes I not only don't know what to pray, but how to pray. If I stay at my prayers, the Spirit goes to work. In effect, the Spirit *"intercedes,"* and I find ourselves miraculously connected with God.

I understand that when it comes to 911 calls there are times when people are so distraught, they cannot put into words what is going on. The call itself is a cry for help. The thing with a 911 call is that the dispatcher always knows where the call comes from and help is immediately dispatched.

And so, it is with you and me. Help is immediately dispatched in our darkest hour when we place our *"call"* to God with *"groans"* that express far more than words could ever express. Be well-assured, help is on the way.

But God

The story is told of a young man who had on his desk a very simple plaque that read, *"But God."*

When asked about that the young man explained that in his hour of deepest need he had learned to say, *"But God."*

In times of trouble he would say, *"But God will help."* In moments of despair he would say, *"But God will give me hope."* In seasons of loneliness he would say, *"But God is with me."* In times feeling unwanted he would say, *"But God loves me."*

And so, in our emerging let's have this to say, *"But God will see us through this life and on to the next."*

"For we know that in all things God works for good of those who love him and have been called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28)