



Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

16 Februar 2020

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Romans 8.18-25, Matthew 6.25-34

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St. Catherines

The end of January I made a short visit to the States to attend my niece's wedding. While we were there, Maj-Britt, my second daughter, and I did some sightseeing in Washington, DC. The Museum of African American History and Culture impressed me most. I grew up in the segregated South. I didn't have any African American classmates until I started the 8th grade. The museum really moved me. I finally began to understand what was for me the "other" side of my history. What really hit home was how the life of the African Americans after the Civil War and the abolition of slavery was a life in between. They lived a life in between a life of slavery and a life as accepted full-blooded American citizens. And the farther south they lived, the more it tilted toward slavery.

As much as the behavior and thoughts of my fellow white Christians angered and shamed me, the depth of the faith of many African American Christians impressed me even more.

These thoughts and observations leapt into my mind when I read the two scripture lessons for today. For, in different ways, Paul and Jesus in Matthew are both writing about living in between. Upon further reflection, I realized they resonate with my life – and I venture to say – your lives, too.

Do not most of us here this morning, at least the non-Germans, also live in-between? Do we not live in between the countries of our birth, of our childhood, perhaps of our youth and young adulthood and the country and culture where we live now? We have strong emotional ties to the land and culture of our heritage – and are now living somewhere else, with a different, rather difficult language and a different culture. Depending upon where we come from, we experience the in-between-ness of lives here more or less strongly. Nonetheless, living in-between characterizes our lives.

Moreover, as Christians, wherever we are, we live in between – in Paul’s terms between the glory awaiting us and the sufferings of this present time, in Jesus’s terms between today’s trouble and the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. This morning I would like to reflect on our living in-between as Christians.

I

Jesus speaks of today’s trouble. Paul uses more drastic language: he speaks of suffering. Paul even extends this to all of creation. For not only we humans long for freedom from bondage to sin and decay, creation also longs for this freedom.

That is a rather stupefying thought! The created world, not just the animals and plants, but also the inanimate objects, rocks, water, wind, fire – everything longs for the freedom of the children of God, for the ultimate fulfillment we associate with the Kingdom of God, to pick up Jesus’s language once again. Not only we humans, created in the image of God, long for fulfillment, salvation, freedom, but so does literally everything else!

When we consider the effects of the climate change produced by us on the rest of creation, this fascinating thought of Paul’s becomes very concrete very fast. The damage and destruction from Sabine is all we need to look at.

When it comes to human sufferings, our own sufferings, we can all fill in the blanks here with what our particular individual sufferings are. Some are physical. Some are emotional. Some are financial. Some are political. Some are political and personal.

Not everyone here really wants to be here. I came here to study – and got stuck. But some of us had to leave home and ended up here because they are safe here. Some of us have more sufferings. Some have less. Some have relatively banal ones. Others struggle with heavy burdens. As one of the fortunate who have relatively little to shoulder, I shall refrain from giving advice to those who have much more to bear than I.

What I do want to do, however, is to point out the undercurrent in both of these texts. Jesus expresses it poetically in Matthew. To pick out just one short passage, *Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry....*

This undercurrent is the assurance, despite appearances to the contrary, that God has not abandoned us. In the midst of our sufferings, regardless of what they are, we are not alone. The God who sent us his son, who died for us, who went to hell and back, who rose from the dead, does not leave us to deal with our sufferings all by ourselves.

This does not mean God solves our problems. But it does mean God is with us in the midst of our sufferings – often in the presence of those persons who come to us, strengthen and comfort us. God is also with in ways that everyone who has experienced this presence can understand, but seldom explain to others. It is such a powerful experience, such an intimate experience that words simply fail us.

This also does not mean God explains the meaning of all our suffering – either to us or to others. One of the greatest temptations for any person in the face of human suffering or grief is to try to explain it. Such an explanation is a desperate attempt by a caring person to comfort or strengthen someone. This is a temptation that befalls preachers probably the most. For it is hard to resist. It is hard to stand before a congregation today and say this – and even harder at the funeral of an eight-year old boy who died of leukemia – and not try to find some kind of meaning in something so brutal and senseless as the death of that boy. There are times when we simply have no answer to the question, “Why?” We just have to bear the silence.

But even when we get no answer, God assures us that we are not left alone. God is with us. God is with us in and among one another. When I

cannot walk or stand, when I am weak or despair, I lean on you. And, I hope, when it's your turn, you can lean on me. That is what the community of faith is about – being there for one another, in a very real sense representing God for one another, being God's agent – even when we don't recognize it or see it that way. However, it may very well be that the other does see it that way.

III

We can do this – together, because we have hope. At the core of both texts is hope. *For, as Paul put it, in hope we were saved.*

Both texts revolve around hope – having hope, keeping hope, nourishing, not losing hope in the midst of circumstances that are, at first glance, hopeless. Both texts point out that we are living on the edge, between the times.

We are in a very deep sense truly strangers in a strange land. This goes far beyond the living in-between African Americans experience – and it goes far beyond my analysis of our living in-between in Germany. We Christians are not at home in this world.

For we live in hope, believing in the unseen. We live in anticipation of the future, actively in anticipation of the future, not leaning back thinking, “God will take care of all this. We do not need to do anything.” No, we accept our calling and live actively in anticipation of the future. We live in hope. And because we have hope, we are active! We live – at least we try to live – the values of the Kingdom of God now!

We live in the present by the values of the future, stretching towards the future, not letting ourselves be tied down by the past – We refuse to let our failures, our weaknesses define us!

Conclusion

This insight is one of the things I learned at the museum in Washington. In the midst of their suffering, frustration, the brutal violence they experienced – and still experience – African American Christians refused to let their suffering define them. They held to the unseen hope – and persevered and stuck together – because they knew, because they experienced that God did not leave them.

Living in-between, between slavery and full citizenship, they understood what it means to live as Christians in an unredeemed world groaning for salvation. Paradoxically, many of them who suffered the most were often the most faithful, the most assured.

My hope for the faithful gathered at St. Catherine's is that we too, in our in-between-ness, can live from this hope, in this hope, toward this hope as so many have done so before – and that we too, in the midst of all our differences and conflicts, can and will be there when the other one needs us.

Amen!