

“The Joy(?) Of Discipleship”

How good is the Good News, the Gospel? That’s the question St. Paul is facing as we tune into the sixth chapter of his letter to the church at Rome. Paul has made such a stunning case for the Good News that he is afraid some of his readers may conclude that, not only is it permissible to continue in sin (because grace has covered sin so completely), it is actually desirable to do so. *“The more we sin, the more grace we get,”* was the conclusion Paul feared. *“Impossible!”* Paul counters.

He then goes on to explain what has happened to them (and to us) in their baptism into Christ. *“Don’t you know that the old way of sin was killed?”* It is dead. Why would you even think that it should be resurrected? No, if there is to be any resurrection it is to be to a new life, not the old life you left behind to follow Christ.

How good is the Good News? It is all good; it tells us that everything and anything that could or would come between us and God has been drowned, buried with Christ. The old life of sin is done for. Yet sin remains; we know it; more than that — we experience it. We want to trust the Good News: ***“So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”***

Then we see ourselves in the mirror — in that dreaded mirror on the back of the bedroom door, or across from the shower — and we know we see there a person who is not “dead to sin” but actively engaged in sin. We absolve ourselves by tending toward the position that our sins are not grotesque. We don’t kill people, or sell drugs to children, or enslave women in prostitution, or commit crimes that maim and kill. We tend to view our lives as Garrison Keillor did, reflecting on Larry the Sad Boy Sorenson, who *“threw himself weeping and contrite on God’s throne of grace on twelve separate occasions—and this in a Lutheran church that wasn’t evangelical, had no altar call, no organist playing ‘Just As I Am Without One Plea’ while a choir hummed and a guy with shiny hair took hold of your heartstrings and played you like a cheap guitar— this is the Lutheran church, not a bunch of hillbillies—these are Scandinavians, and*

they repent in the same way that they sin: discreetly, tastefully, at the proper time, and bring a Jell-O salad for afterward.” “*We’re not like them,*” we want to proclaim because the Pharisee within is beginning to show forth.

Yet we can recognize that sin persists. Can anyone here claim to be perfect? How about “being perfected”? That’s what is happening for those who are in Christ. It is a process. We need to see this along a continuum. At one end, total depravity: ***“the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”*** [Romans 8:7-8] On the other end, union with Christ: ***“So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”***

Where are you on that continuum? Just beginning? On the backstretch? Nearing the finish line? Starting over, yet again? In a ditch off to the side? Do not think of this as a timetable; think of it as a measurement of your closeness to God and your sense that God is close to you.

He is, you know. As close as your heartbeat; as near as your breath. If you cannot sense that closeness, then there are too many distractions that are bombarding your life, trying to cut you off from God. You (and I, I will confess) need to turn off those distractions: Take a time-out from the internet, the smart phone, the TV; time out from work schedules, appointments, calls to make; time out from household chores, ferrying kids to the myriad places they have signed up to be, daily pressures; time simply to sit in the presence of God and be at peace with Him.

At first, don’t try to do or say anything; just be, just be there. And begin to sense that God is there, as well; Jesus is present in the space with you. Do it for two minutes, then over time lengthen that to five, then eight, then ten or twelve minutes. You may well discover that Luther had it right when he said, *“I have so much to do that I shall need to spend the first three hours in prayer.”*

What do I do or say during all that time? Maybe we need to learn something from the prophet Jeremiah, who begins today’s First Lesson with a complaint: ***“O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you***

have overpowered me, and you have prevailed.” The word that is translated “enticed” here is the Hebrew word *patah* and is usually translated as “deceived” — Jeremiah is claiming that God has pulled a “bait and switch” routine on him. More than that, he charges that God bullied him into accepting the deal.

Dr. Terrence Fretheim asks: “*How can Jeremiah talk to God like this? He goes on and on! ‘The word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long’ (20:8). ‘Cursed be the day on which I was born! ...Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow and spend my days in shame’ (20:14, 18)?*” . . . *How can these biblical characters speak to God like that? But they do, easily and often. Do they not model for us an openness to speak to God in comparable ways? Can we not voice to God our deepest questions and complaints, no holds barred? Certainly these kinds of prayers can be an important way for us to speak to God in difficult times. Given any number of personal crises we may face, these kinds of prayers are a genuine gift.*”

We make the mistake of thinking of prayer merely as asking. If you have a friend who never wants to talk to you unless it is to ask you for something, you would begin to doubt that friend’s friendship.

In prayer we talk to God — openly and honestly. Don’t like what life is handing you? Tell him. Angry over some loss you’ve incurred? Let Him know it. (“*But*” you say, “*He already knows it. He knows everything! I don’t need to tell Him.*” Yes, you do; not because He needs to hear; because you need to express it.) Are you ecstatic because of that great thing that occurred? Get it up and out. Worried about what comes next? Speak it.

But now go back to Jeremiah and look at the progression of his prayer. He starts out angry, disappointed. He gives vent to his frustration and his fears. He holds back nothing — he just lets it rip! But notice how he ends: “***But the Lord is with me like a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble, and they will not prevail. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten. O Lord of hosts, you test the righteous, you see the heart and***

the mind; let me see your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause. Sing to the LORD; praise the LORD! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers.”

Jeremiah has moved from lamentation to exaltation; his lament becomes a doxology. Read through what are called the imprecatory Psalms and you see that same progression. When you find the freedom to voice your inner needs, this is the way it must go. When you lament before God you hand over to God whatever weight, concern, or loss you have been carrying, and you wind up in praise to Him.

In your thinking about such laments, a great deal depends upon the kind of God you think you are dealing with. When reflecting on the way in which people image God in the church and elsewhere, opinions tend toward two extremes.

On the one hand, God is an uninvolved overseer, sitting on the front porch of heaven watching the world go by; as one layperson told me: *“For me, God is an absentee landlord. Your calls are seldom returned and nothing much gets done.”*

Or, go to the other extreme and image God as an absolute monarch, in total control of things, micromanaging the world. But, as one student voiced to me: *“... if God is in control, then given how unruly we all are, wouldn't we have to score God a crashing management failure?”*

Another way to speak of such extremes: On the one hand, God is so above and beyond this world that every prayer is a roaming cell phone call that cuts in and out. Or, at the other extreme, God is buddy-buddy, takes no critical stance, is never in your face. Never is heard a discouraging word and the skies are not cloudy all day kind of God! We sing only praise songs here.

Well, Jeremiah and many other biblical characters clearly sing more than praise songs. Sometimes when we pray, we think of God as a superman, superwoman, who hears our prayers and, faster than a speeding bullet, is there to accomplish anything and everything. With such a God, no constraints or restraints are in view, and the only issue falls back on

whether the one who prays has enough faith.

But, we often forget that more is at work in these situations than our prayers and God's will. And it may be that some factors are so resistant to the will of God that God's will does not get done (in that moment). God's heart is the first to break and God's tears are the first to flow.

When thinking about prayer and God, or any other important matter of faith, one of the most important things to keep in mind is that God has established a genuine relationship with us. Think for a minute about a person with whom you are closely related. If that relationship is to be genuine, what is necessary for it to be so? Certainly a key factor would be healthy communication, being able to speak openly and honestly with each other. God understands that for our relationship with God to be genuine, our voice counts, too. God is not the only one who has something important to say. And so God gifts us with prayer, including speaking our mind to God about whatever we may endure.

God values what we have to say; God honors what we bring to the table. Laments are a God-given way for us to make a situation more open for God, to give God more room to work in our lives. If we cannot vent the hurt, the anger, the bitterness, the grief that enters our lives, we store it — not just in our minds, but in our bodies. Eventually, there is no room left for others, for God, not even for ourselves.

We must (i.e. we need to) give expression to all that hurt. If we aim it at other people, we will only offend, hurt, invite retaliation, and increased bitterness. The only option is we must give it to God. First, He can take whatever we have to dish out. Second, He alone can receive what we have to say and take it off our shoulders.

We can be confident that God always has our best interests at heart and will work with our prayers and other factors to create the best possible future. God is open to taking new directions in view of new times and places, in view of the interaction within the relationship. Yet, never changing will be God's steadfast love for you and God's faithfulness to the promises God has made to you.

Life can be hard. Wounds from the past, wounds we encounter day by day. Failure to get what we need (that's called neglect); getting something we most definitely do not need (that's called abuse). Losses, deaths, physical injuries, sickness. Bad hair days, hangnails, paper cuts. They can amass in our lives and build up steam in our psyches until we cannot hold back any longer — and then it becomes a gusher.

Life can be hard . . . but when you give the pain to God, life becomes wonderfully hard. There is no promise that God will take away every difficulty and make things all better again. But He will come alongside us — to strengthen, to soothe, to listen.

In part, this is what Jesus means when He tells us, ***“Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”*** So let go. Set the pain free. Voice the anger. Shout the frustration. But aim it at God so that He can turn your sorrow into doxology, your mourning into dancing.

Amen.