

Title: All Creation Groans

Pentecost (COMMUNION SUNDAY)

Pastor Morgan Murray

West Valley Presbyterian Church

Romans 8:22-27

22 **We know** that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

23 Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as [daughters and] sons, the redemption of our bodies.

24 For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? 25 But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

26 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 with groans that words cannot express.

27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

Pentecost Sunday is a very good day to remember that there are things that we know, and things that we do not know.

When my kids were very small, there would be one question that they would ask whenever we piled into the car for a vacation trip. "Where are we going?" They would ask. And I would tell them, "We are going to Bass

Lake” or “We are going to Legoland” or “We are going back to Arizona, where you were born.” If we hadn’t been to these places before, or if the last time we were there was when the children were too young to remember it, these answers might have been satisfying in the moment, but they weren’t in fact terribly helpful. And if I tried to explain what the family cabin in the mountains were like, or what an amusement park is like, or what the desert at springtime is like, some vague notion of the place might have come to mind for them. But only at the arriving—and the experiencing—would they truly understand.

There are things that we know, and things that we do not yet know. And people Paul describes as “led by the Spirit of God” who are “God’s children” (Rom 8:14), we know we are going somewhere. We don’t know how to get there ourselves, and we don’t fully grasp what it will be like when we arrive. But we know we are going someplace good.

Paul has written these words as part of a Letter of Introduction to the church in Rome, perhaps 20 years after the Pentecost events in Acts 2. It is very possible the Roman church was founded by Jewish believers who first heard the gospel in Jerusalem that day. Romans chapter 8 – easily one of the most memorized and meditated upon passages of scripture that begins with the unspeakably great promise, “There is NOW no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”—is Paul’s glorious bottom line when it comes to the implications of the gospel. What started in the garden with an empty tomb, and was made manifest among the disciples in the upper room, and has now been established among even you believers all the way in Rome. This is the result of the generative power of the Spirit.

What was true at Pentecost is still true: This is the stuff of true Life, a direct expression and the inevitable result of Love, poured out by the Father, Son and Spirit are into all creation. What the church encountered at Pentecost is still no less an utterly free gift from God—and therefore completely beyond our ability to control, manipulate, distribute, or withhold.

We know life is happening. **We don't know** how to make life happen. Or as Paul puts it, "**We know** that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time." And then a little later, "**We do not know** what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit... intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express."

In what we know, and what we don't know, there is groaning. There is a shared effort and burden. Life doesn't come easy, and it is truly a mystery. But it is an effort, a burden, and a mystery that we – both as part of creation and as those who have the firstfruits of the Spirit – get to co-participate with God in bringing about. Now that we are "in Christ" – a shorthand phrase Paul uses over and over again to capture the essence of a transformed life – we are now aware of the Big Something that God is up to, even if we can't fully grasp how it is happening and don't have power in and of ourselves to make it happen.

All of creation is in the flow of God's grace, which flows like a river toward the culmination of Love. We are in that flow, along all with all creation, whether we realize it or not.

The world is headed in the right direction, even if it is three steps forward and two steps back.

The two steps back are, indeed, a big deal. We can sum them up with one little word: Sin. There is a lot of violent, greedy, genocidal, narcissistic, stupid sin stuff in the world. And Paul has spent the first seven chapters of his letter reflecting on it.

Of all the definitions of the sin I've heard, the one I like best is: Sin is a refusal to grow. And this definition works well with Romans 8, because we see how sin is a resistance to what the Spirit is birthing. Growth leads to maturity, which has its natural expression is reproduction. Sin is a refusal to grow, and to grow up. Sin is the exhausting work swimming against the current of God's grace river.

That is why I speak so often of surrender. Surrender is the necessary work of accepting that we don't know better than God, that we will never get dictate terms to how God should work in our lives or in the world, and that the movement toward greater growth, greater wholeness, and greater life is

always a movement of greater and greater surrender to what God has been doing all along.

Again, as I often like to say, surrender is very different from “giving up.” To give up is to abandon hope. And that is clearly not what Paul is saying! Surrender means giving ourselves fully to the God in whom our hope is assured, even if we can’t fully grasp the thing we are hoping for. It is simply too big for us to hold! But hope is not too big for us to hold. The certain expectancy of hope continually reminds us: Where we are is not where we are going to end up. History is going somewhere. We are going somewhere. And thanks be to God alone, the place we are going is somewhere good!

This is worthy of our continued meditation and reflection. To contemplate this reality in deep ways is what Paul urges us toward when he invites us pray.

[Anglican bishop, theologian, and poet] Rowan Williams’ address to the Roman Synod of Bishops in 2012:

[Contemplation] is very far from being just one kind of thing that Christians do: it is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom—freedom from self-oriented, acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that comes from them. To put it boldly, contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that

our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit. To learn contemplative practice is to learn what we need so as to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly. It is a deeply revolutionary matter.

Contemplation is the posture in which Spirit-led prayer is possible. Otherwise prayer is just formulas, repeating clichés that we think God likes. Contemplation is resting in God. When Paul says, “We do not know how to pray” (Romans 8:26), we should be open to the idea that this will always be true! I feel that I am just now learning to see the world as God sees it, and therefore to enter into Spirit-aided prayer. Paul seems to be inviting to continually have “a beginner’s mind” that allows us to be continually learning, continually surrendering, continually groaning, and continually growing.

Amen.

Morgan Murray

Transitional Pastor

West Valley Presbyterian Church

6191 Bollinger Road

Cupertino, CA 95014

408/252.1365 x111

wvpc.org