

Today's second reading comes from Paul's letter to the Romans, Chapter 8, verses 12-25. Listen for God's word to you this day:

"So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with your spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified in him.

"I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."

This is the word of God for the people of God...thanks be to God.

Last week we encountered the sower in the field as he scattered seeds on the various soils, we were reminded of God's abundant love for all people, in all circumstances.

And, then our first reading today continues in that same theme with the sower addressing the wheat fields that have become home to weeds as well. Hope can sometimes seem to get lost when we focus only on the bad soil or the weeds, but today's passage reminds us to use the moments of pain to be guided to hope.

Paul begins this section with an explanation of what it means to live according to the flesh and the spirit. To live by the flesh is death, and to live by the Spirit is to be a child of God. Living by the flesh isn't just a simplified denial of our bodies. No, it is to prioritize one's own desires and wants over the good of all. To focus on self-interest over common good. To live by the flesh prioritizes personal well-being over the well-being of creation.

Paul continues, "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption." God doesn't require us to be in bondage or slavery to that which the body, or by default society, would lure us toward, rather God adopts us, calls us all children of God, and gives us the gift of the Spirit to guide us, so that we no longer need to serve the will of the body.

It is important to realize that the serving of the flesh is not just personal, this is also societal because the will of the body inevitably will be used to pervert an entire society by expanding its longings into the halls of power and making its home in the

egos of the powerful so that the individual bondage, becomes communal bondage. And, results in a societal malaise of bondage that denies the movement of God's spirit. Paul says all of this to set up what comes next, he is making sure we understand that choosing life in the Spirit isn't a fairytale existence, it will require facing and experiencing suffering. The suffering of creation is known by those who live by the spirit.

Paul says that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves.

We are intrinsically and inescapably connected with all of creation, humans, animals, plants, the soil, the water, we are all connected as God's creation, in need of redemption because of the ways in which we have distanced ourselves from God's intentions through choice and been distanced by systemic acts that impact every aspect of creation. Being led by the flesh has created a chasm between us and others, and us and the entirety of God's creation.

Paul instead, invites us to recognize that we are part of the whole, that we are part of the creation that is crying out in need of hope, in need of God's spirit to guide us. He invites us to pause, consider our actions, and wonder what we can do different so that we are not the ones creating distance between God's intentions for life and the reality of what life is. Living in the Spirit comes with responsibility to life beyond the self.

This section of the text, where Paul is so poignantly calling us to hear that the whole of creation groaning in labor pains hit me in a new way a few years ago. I had the honor of visiting the Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration and the

accompanying memorial: The National Memorial for Peace and Justice both in Montgomery, Alabama. At the time, the memorial and museum were newly opened. We went first to the memorial, which marks the lives of more than 4400 African American men, women, and children who were hanged, burned alive, shot, drowned, and beaten to death by white mobs between 1877 and 1950. Until the opening of this memorial there has been no national memorial acknowledging the victims of racial terror lynching.¹ Walking through this memorial is breath-taking, and painful.

Just a few miles down the road is the museum, which is located on the site of a former warehouse where Black people were enslaved in Montgomery, Alabama. This museum uses interactive media, sculpture, videography, and exhibits to immerse visitors in the sights and sounds of the domestic slave trade, racial terrorism, the Jim Crow South, and the world's largest prison system.² It too is breath-taking and painful.

There were newspaper pages that had been magnified to show the details of the stories and the photos of unimaginable abuse and injustice, but there was one thing that struck me the most, down the middle of the room, were jars of soil lined up on shelves. The jars were filled with soil and labeled with names and towns and dates. These names and towns and dates were the very locations where a person had been lynched. Places all across the Southern United States, small towns, big cities. That soil comes from the place where someone was killed. This soil was the earth at their feet.

And in those jars is the groaning of creation. In those jars is the memory of a terrible past and the hope for a redemptive future where all of creation no longer groans

¹ Official language about the Memorial from www.eji.org.

² Official language about the Museum from www.eji.org.

in pain, but has gone through the labor pains and come to the other side celebrating the redemptive groans of the holy spirit interceding on our behalf.

It is an image that has come back to me time and time again as I think about the connection between all of God's creation, humanity, land, water, air, birds, reptiles, the list goes on and on from the smallest to the largest organism. It makes me wonder how God's spirit groaning through each marred part of creation has marked us. This marred history is not the work of being led by the spirit of God, recognizing our adoption as God's children.

This is life in the flesh, and when we are led by the flesh we do unjust, violent, and vile things. We die.

As I stood there looking at the jars that day I wondered how we change, how we have changed, if change is possible. How do we change our future by examining the pain of the past. How do we turn the literal groans of creation, the soil crying out, humanity crying out, and turn it into hope unseen? The groaning in our midst should be a unifying call to action for those of us who believe the Holy Spirit of God resides within us and guides us. For those of us who claim adoption by God as God's very own children. For when we are led by the Spirit we imagine a hope that is unseen and refuse to let the groans go unanswered.

Hope unseen seems a little daunting at times. A little cumbersome in the midst of everything going on in our personal lives and the world around us. So what does it mean to be the one who hopes in the midst of the pain?

As scholar David Greenshaw says, “In some instances the one who hopes may be the only one with the courage to endure the suffering of the present time.”³ Is this what Paul means when he proclaims we wait in patience, that we just endure the suffering of the present time? Some may think we are to sit by and wait passively for God’s kingdom to arrive, as though those who live by the flesh will all just repent and reform in one instance making the path to justice for all easy and unobstructed. No, “Patience is not the same thing as acquiescence. Patience in this sense is not satisfied with the present, but lives toward a future promised by God.”⁴

We are filled with hope that is beyond what we see, that recognizes the labor pains of creation, that calls us to sit in the midst of the groans and bring hope for a future yet unseen. Paul says, we are debtors, but not to the flesh. Our debt is to the Spirit, to a life that is lived out believing that we have the power, through the Spirit, to bring what is unseen to fruition in this time and place. That by something beyond us, by God alone in us, we could possibly turn those painful marks of history so breath-takingly and painfully teaching us, into new life, with deep roots, and abundance. We, by the power of the Spirit, have the ability to bring wheat to harvest and root out the weeds that long to mark their territory. The Spirit brings good fruit to life, the Spirit brings the full harvest, it is the flesh that distracts, bringing the weeds to the otherwise healthy field.

Friends, we are invited be the bearers of hope by God’s Spirit, to allow God’s Spirit to lead us, individually and communally, so that we can hear the groaning of

³ Greenshaw, David M., Bartlett, David Lyon, and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, 256.

⁴ Greenshaw, David M., Bartlett, David Lyon, and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, 256-258.

Grace First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, July 19, 2020

Rev. Ashley Drake Mertz
Romans 8:12-25

creation and even ourselves, and by that hearing to work towards God's kingdom here and now, work towards hope that is yet unseen. God is not holding it back from us, it is ours for enjoying. We are invited to face the moments of pain our flesh has caused, our wills have caused, and then turn to God, with all of who we are, to live by God's Spirit alone, so that hope may be brought forth through us.

May it be so. Amen.