

August 4, 2019
A Sublime Madness
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Romans 8:18-30

¹⁸ I am sure that what we are suffering now cannot compare with the glory that will be shown to us. ¹⁹ In fact, all creation is eagerly waiting for God to show who his children are. ²⁰ Meanwhile, creation is confused, but not because it wants to be confused. God made it this way in the hope ²¹ that creation would be set free from decay and would share in the glorious freedom of his children. ²² We know that all creation is still groaning and is in pain, like a woman about to give birth.

²³ The Spirit makes us sure about what we will be in the future. But now we groan silently, while we wait for God to show that we are his children. This means that our bodies will also be set free. ²⁴ And this hope is what saves us. But if we already have what we hope for, there is no need to keep on hoping. ²⁵ However, we hope for something we have not yet seen, and we patiently wait for it.

²⁶ In certain ways we are weak, but the Spirit is here to help us. For example, when we don't know what to pray for, the Spirit prays for us in ways that cannot be put into words. ²⁷ All of our thoughts are known to God. He can understand what is in the mind of the Spirit, as the Spirit prays for God's people. ²⁸ We know that God is always at work for the good of everyone who loves him. They are the ones God has chosen for his purpose, ²⁹ and he has always known who his chosen ones would be. He had decided to let them become like his own Son, so that his Son would be the first of many children. ³⁰ God then accepted the people he had already decided to choose, and he has shared his glory with them. (Contemporary English Version)

Outside the poetry, hardly ever is King James my favorite translation of the Bible. But I do love Romans 8:18: *For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.* I love it for those first three words and how they remind me of my mother and all my mother's people talking their everyday talk: *I reckon I oughta get supper started. I reckon it will work out one way or another.* If I asked to go over to my friend Sharon's house, she'd say, "Well I reckon. But you all play outside and don't pester Eileen." Eileen was Sharon's mom and my mom's good friend.

Reckon is a word from the dialect of my people, and it's in the stories I love most, like *Forrest Gump* and *Huck Finn*. Simply, it means to have figured something out, to have worked it out in one's thoughts, experience, heart. I thought I would read you a bit of *Huck* working out some theology from chapter three. He still lives with Miss Watson and the spinster widow in this part.

... Miss Watson told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get it. But it warn't so. I tried it. Once I got a fish-line, but no hooks. It warn't any good to me without hooks. I tried for the hooks three or four times, but somehow I couldn't make it work. By and by, one day, I asked Miss Watson to try for me, but she said I was a fool. She never told me why, and I couldn't make it out no way. I set down one time back in the woods, and had a long think about it. I says to myself, if a body can get anything they pray for, why don't Deacon Winn get back the money he lost on pork? Why can't the widow get back her silver snuffbox that was stole? Why can't Miss Watson fat up? No, says I to myself, there ain't nothing in it.

I went and told the widow about it, and she said the thing a body could get by praying for it was "spiritual gifts." This was too many for me, but she told me what she meant – I must help other people, and do everything I could for other people, and look out for them all the time, and never think about myself. This was including Miss Watson, as I took it. I went out in the woods and turned it over in my mind a long time, but I couldn't see no advantage about it – except for the other people; so at last I reckoned I wouldn't worry about it any more, but just let it go.

Sometimes the widow would take me one side and talk about Providence in a way to make a body's mouth water; but maybe next day Miss Watson would take hold and knock it all down again. I judged I could see that there was two Providences, and a poor chap would stand considerable show with the widow's Providence, but if Miss Watson's got him there warn't no help for him any more. I thought it all out, and reckoned I would belong to the widow's if he wanted me, though I couldn't make out how he was a-going to be any better off then than what he was before, seeing I was so ignorant, and so kind of low-down and ornery.

The image of Huck turning the nature of God over and over in his mind is as good an image as any of the Apostle Paul trying to tell heads from tails – to tell life in the flesh from life in the Spirit. He's rewriting not just his theology, but his own life's meaning and purpose, in light of the Christ event and reckons Jesus changes everything: *That the sufferings of this present existence – the big ones and the small ones – are not even worth comparing to the glory to be revealed.*

Let's pray, friends, and then take a look at the middle part of Romans 8.

How we walk and talk and think and live every moment of our lives; how we treat each other and understand the world; what we feel, what we want, what we need; whom we love, how we love; the meaning of death, the purpose of life – O God, you've got us living in the upside down now, where everything is different, even when nothing we can see, hear, touch, smell, or taste has changed a bit. Help us find our way. Amen.

When I chose this sermon title, I knew exactly what bulletin cover I wanted. Don't you love her?



Reinhold Niebuhr is where I got the term *sublime madness*. He uses it in the context of religious people's involvement in political and social change, saying that it takes a kind of *sublime madness* to imagine a world in which perfect justice is possible, because such imagination, he writes, does not count as evidence for what is possible. Only that which can be *seen, heard, smelled, touched or tasted* counts.

I love the picture for the way my hen seems to imagine herself as so much more than a mere backyard chicken. *Sublime madness* is, simply, what Paul calls *hope*. Hope – the confidence that what we can see, hear, smell, touch and taste is not all there is to count on in this life. Hope – food and drink for our soul, more than enough to live on, should we choose to take and eat.

Paul gives three gifts in this middle section of Romans 8: his masterful metaphor for the meaning of suffering,

a very useful word about prayer, and three verses Protestantism might happily have done without. Just to get it off the board, I'll take \$400 under Protestant Reformation: another word for the "L" of 5-Point Calvinism. Answer: What is Predestination? Do you know the "L" I am referring to? Limited atonement. The idea that God has already sorted us out; the heavenly banquet has a divinely-fixed guest list; only God knows for sure who's on it. Never has one word causes so much ruckus.

You can read up later if you want. I've a tiny contribution, which is this. Far more people *act* like they believe in predestination than profess to – meaning, we all have folks we are sure God is going to send to hell, or should. We categorize people and passively assume God agrees with us. Not because we are terrible people necessarily; but, rather, how could we function otherwise? How could we function if we truly, truly thought that those brown children in cages at the border were as precious as the little ones who sleep in our houses. Is that harsh? Of course. And humbling, hopefully. A breaking up of the

resistance to justice that takes courage and to the sort of kindness that takes effort. I reckon that's all I have to say about predestination.

About prayer, Romans 8:21-23 has maybe the wisest prayer advice ever: when you don't know what to pray, you don't have to. And maybe you shouldn't, because some prayers have no words and some don't need to be prayed. I'm guessing most of you have never attended a quarterly Southern Baptist Associational meeting. In my previous job, attendance was required. A quarterly associational meeting is a local denominational business meeting that feels compelled to be a worship service too. So there are boring reports and loud preaching.

Of the four years I attended them, I remember only one with any clarity: the time a preacher prayed a train wreck of a prayer from the pulpit. For nearly fifteen minutes in his prayer – remember, every head bowed, every eye closed, with us standing up – he recounted a conversation between himself and the *beautiful young woman* who had recently cut and styled his hair (I kid you not; he said “*cut and styled*” in the prayer). Line by line, he told the Lord – and allowed all of us to listen in – how the beautiful young woman confided in him about her troubled marriage and how he encouraged her, and how she longed for a husband so wise and so godly. I had to sit down and put my head down on the pew – not because I was overcome with the Spirit, when actually I was just sweaty and anxious and needing to laugh. Not because it was so funny, but because it was so awful and I was so nervous. I was praying – praying that he would stop.

At first glance, of course it's a prayer that should never be prayed. But what if it's actually a prayer that had no words? I suppose God heard what he couldn't say: maybe that he felt unimportant; that there in that room full of preachers, where he had again been skipped over when they were looking for someone to preach, he felt again like his work, his ministry, his life even, didn't measure up so much. Maybe that's what God heard, while I was in pew judging him.

There are prayers we shouldn't pray: prayers that insult God, by asking God to do what God has already done. *God save me from this or that situation*, when God has already saved us from every situation. Or asking God to do what God has equipped and called *us* to do. *God be with the poor; God take care of the refugee*. The only prayers worth praying are the ones that pulse with hope, and these are the prayers where language is most likely to fail – the ones for which we are least likely to find the right words, maybe even least likely to find the voice to say what is on our hearts – be it suffering or joy or something more nameless yet.

The third gift is Paul's metaphor for the meaning of our suffering. I have this image of him in his cell, tapping his feather on his desk – writer's block, don't you know – getting up to refill his wineglass, and seeing a hugely pregnant woman walk by, carrying her toddler and shopping bag. He has his image. We are her, he says – humanity, in fact, this whole creation – we are her, bearing ourselves and creation itself toward our own

rebirth in Christ. And this bearing – it is heavy. It is heavy and we are weak. But we will come out of it remade, a new humanity, a new creation.

I love how in Paul's image we are both mama and baby. I've been the mama in labor three times. About a dozen times I had the privilege of being nearby. One of my sweet congregants – who shall remain nameless – was *in transition*, as the doulas say, for so long and the baby had their chin tucked so far into their neck, their head was shaped like a hammerhead shark. Another UBC kid had a head like an upside-down ice cream cone – only not a sugar cone. A cake cone, perfectly flattened on top, the whole thing tilted to one side. It wasn't jaunty either. It was more alien-ish. My first baby came out scratched and bruised, like she'd already been in a fight. They laid my second, my son, on my belly – huge, bright red, and screaming with hunger. My second thought was, *he's perfect, I love him*. But my first thought was, *no way was this enormous thing inside me. This cannot possibly be my baby*.

The point is, it's hard to be the mama – but it is also hard to be the baby. One is tired and heavy-burdened. The other is squished, folded up in darkness and then . . . the only way out is head first through a tiny little opening. It's painful and traumatic when it goes well! Don't you wish you could remember how delicious it must have felt to stretch for the very first time? My husband says that when babies stretch, they don't go back to the size they were before. They grow the tiniest little bit.

I love thinking that is also what dying is like – only, it's our hearts and souls that are all squished up in this present darkness, this flesh-bound reality. That when we die, our souls stretch into their true shape and size, shed of all those identities we thought we needed to breathe, to be. Is that crazy talk? If so, I don't mind.

This *sublime madness*, Reinhold Niebuhr said, is a madness the secular imagination isn't capable of achieving, as it requires that one disregard how things look and sound to the world. This *sublime madness* – also called *hope* – is turned toward ultimate and, for the moment, unseen realities. Paul started with *law and grace* and he's moved to *flesh and spirit*. He's got lots and lots of words left before he's done – done persuading us that we have a choice, *the choice*, between despair and hope.

Jesus has done all that's needed, friends, all that's needed for us to endure – and not *just endure* but to **thrive with joy** – in a world that offers little cause for hope. This world need not overwhelm us. Not if we choose hope. Not if we, once and for all, but also every morning and sometimes ten times a day, lean away from the world and lean into the Spirit. Lean in with all our breath, with all our feeling, all our thinking, all our expecting. So much so we feel a little crazy, a little bit mad, if you will.

A *sublime madness*, that one guy called it. I reckon he might be right. Let's pray.