

## **“Optimistic Realism – Suffering, Patience, and Hope”**

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First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Colorado Springs, CO

July 20, 2014

### **Romans 8:12-25** *(New Revised Standard Version)*

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 our 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 with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the 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 if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

This passage was intriguing to me this week for one main reason – the part about “the whole creation groaning in labor pains.” I read that, and immediately thought of the labor that *I* had witnessed the week before. It was while I was at the beach in South Carolina with my family. No, it was *not* the labor of a human baby being born, thankfully. Instead, I witnessed the birth of Loggerhead sea turtles. The mother of these little turtles had done her labor two months before, but over the 3 nights that my family and I were at the beach, at least 5 more sea turtle mothers came ashore on Seabrook Island and laid their own nests, then went back into the ocean, leaving the eggs and baby turtles in them to their own devices, and to the care of the island’s volunteer Turtle Patrol who looks out for them. Because these sea turtles are an endangered species, the labor involved in the birth of all of those eggs is pretty considerable. First, the Loggerhead sea turtle mother goes through the great effort of crawling ashore the beach, leaving the marks of their bodies and flippers in the sand. She digs a nest – a deep hole in the sand –then lays dozens and dozens of eggs – one nest we saw had 85 eggs, and another had 163. She works to push the sand back into the hole over the eggs, then turns around, slowly crawling back out to

sea. Then, the work of the volunteer Turtle Patrol begins. Every morning they look for the tell-tale marks of the mother's crawl on the beach, and find the nest. If the mother did not lay the eggs far enough into the beach, past the point that the high tide comes, the volunteers carefully dig up the nest, take out the eggs one by one, keeping them in the same position that they were laid in as they place them in a bucket. Then they go farther inland, re-dig a 2 foot nest, carefully place the eggs back in, then cover them with some of the sand from the original nest site. They put wire netting over the nest to deter predators like raccoons and crabs, then wait. 50-60 days later, they start keeping a look out for the signs of the nest having movement inside as the developed baby turtles hatch out of their eggs and start digging their way up. Most of the time, the babies naturally come out during the dusk or sunrise, when the moon is up over the water. The hatchlings' natural instincts depend on the moonlight to guide them into the water. If there is another light stronger than the moon, they get confused. And here the turtle patrol is helpful again. They watch, count as the turtles come out, and if there are any problems, help the turtles get to the surf of the ocean.

That's the part that my mother, sister and I witnessed along with the Turtle Patrol one night just a little over a week ago. Thanks to a friend, we knew they were expecting turtles to hatch that evening, so we made our way to the beach. As we watched, and as the sun went down and it got darker, the sand of the nest began to move. We used red filters on flashlights to see, so that white light wouldn't confuse them. Finally, a little sea turtle crawled out of the sand and through the holes of the protective wire netting. It crawled down the dune and towards the ocean. Then, quickly, two more little turtles followed right behind. The distance to the surf was short for this nest, and it was close to high tide, so the babies didn't have far to crawl, and they didn't need any help. The water came in, and the turtles were lifted on the wave, then out to sea. From there, we can only hope that they got through the immediate dangers of the ocean, and are able to grow into full adult Loggerhead sea turtles. Frankly, the odds are against them. But, some of them make it, and that hope is what all that work, all that labor, is all about.

I love the symbols of hope that the Seabrook Island Turtle Patrol embodied as they worked to help those turtle hatchlings have the best possible chance of survival. Not only does the story call to mind that phrase in our scripture, “the whole creation groaning in labor pains,” but all of the work of the volunteers can teach us about the message of the entire passage. It is a passage about what it means to suffer, what it means to hope, and why those are part of our work at all. The work of the turtle patrol is actually similar – I like to think of them as Optimistic Realists. They *know* that the odds are against the hatchlings they help. But even in the face of that reality, they do their work anyway, with *hope* in the face of bad odds. It is the *reason* they do it that is the most important – they believe that saving those turtles will make the world a better place. They believe that helping the Creation have *life is important*. And maybe, just maybe, some part of them recognizes what this Scripture passage reminds *us* of as well – that from the beginning, we’re all in this together.

Let’s go back to the Scripture passage – there’s some important context to keep in mind as we learn what it says about suffering, hope, and the reason for it all.

Paul was writing the book of Romans for a mixed community – Jews, non-Jews, rich, poor, and everything in between. The message of the first part of our passage is telling them all that God is being faithful to God’s covenant with all of creation, the covenant of Noah and of Abraham, that *all* peoples will be part of the inheritance that was originally thought of as a *Jewish* inheritance only. Now, Paul is saying that Gentiles have the *same* inheritance, just as God promised. Jews are children of God, *and Gentiles* are children of God. The language of adoption tells them that Gentiles have the same *rights*, and the same responsibility, that Jews have always had, and continue to have.

And Paul is realistic about what exactly that means. He doesn’t pretend that the inheritance doesn’t come with a cost. He’s a realist – there will be suffering involved.

If we today don’t necessarily relate to that whole adoption of Gentiles part – we’ve kind of gotten used to that over time – the suffering part is something that we can definitely relate to.

Suffering is part of humanity forever. There are parts of it that have gotten easier for us today – as Christians in America today we don't face the same oppression that followers of Christ at those times would have faced – but our suffering is no less.

It doesn't take much to create a long list of examples of suffering in our world today. There is literal, physical, emotional suffering. The suffering that happens when bodies are ill and in pain, the suffering that happens when someone dearly loved is lost, the suffering that happens when it seems like our minds and bodies don't cooperate with the desires of our spirits. The suffering that happens when one person verbally or physically hurts another. And there's existential suffering – wailing with frustration with each new story of death, of violence, of destruction. Suffering of *not knowing* if something might happen to us any moment. Suffering of asking *why* and not being able to get a decent answer.

There were too many examples of suffering in the news this last week, with the shooting down of a passenger plane killing almost 300 people; the continued fighting and killing in Gaza, Ukraine and Russia, and so many other places. The suffering as children leave their homes on their own looking for safety from violence. The suffering as Rwandans remembered the 20 year anniversary of the end of that genocide – the celebration that it had ended, the pain that it ever was in the first place.

These could be examples of what one commentator called “cosmic suffering” – suffering that seems embedded in very creation and will never cease, and produces feelings of frustration, futility, weakness, and subjugation. In Paul's words, “In bondage to decay.”

So *why*, with all of that in front of us, do we *hope*? Because we certainly *do* hope. Even in the midst of beautiful species of animals slowly going towards extinction, we hope, and we spend time doing everything we can to give turtle hatchlings the best chance of survival. We keep working to find diplomatic solutions to the differences between peoples and nations. We study, we learn, and we try to *remember* suffering so that it might not happen again in the same way.

What is this hope that we use to keep pushing forward? A professor at Christian Theological Seminary, Marti Steussy, says that (slightly paraphrased) “Sometimes optimism doesn’t seem warranted....Hope is believing against the evidence that God intends fullness of life for us....It’s not ordinary optimism, but refusing to despair....That word at the end of this scripture, translated *patience*, can also mean *persistence*. In other words Paul is telling us, Do not give up!”<sup>1</sup>

Hope can be both a beautiful and also frustrating thing for the person who has it. I liked the phrase that another commentator uses saying, “One who hopes has a restless heart. Hope is accompanied by hurt and disappointment, but also of action. We know love, freedom, life, and hunger for more. We cry out wherever love is absent, life is shortened, where freedom is taken away.”<sup>2</sup>

Suffering and hope are not contradictory, but inseparably interwoven. Think again of pregnancy, of labor. In the best case, the mother cannot wait for pain to be over, but also cannot wait to meet the long-awaited child.

That image of labor pangs is important. Labor pangs are *bodily* pains. Verses in this passage should not be misread to find Paul saying that bodies are inherently bad. Instead, our bodies are part of the creation, part of the incarnation of the Spirit. Our bodies are part of God’s work in the world. In Early Judaism, there was a belief that literal suffering would summon God’s final deliverance. In other words, suffering would act as labor pangs that would birth the age to come. For Early Christians, that’s exactly what Jesus’ suffering did. His pains were not leading to death, but they were pains signaling new birth, new beginnings. In Paul’s message to us, we are not escaping bodies or earth, but we are becoming a more truly embodied people, spirit and body *more* fully working together, as they already do, and doing it better.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [processandfaith.org/resources/lectionary-commentary/yeara/2014-07-20/proper-11](http://processandfaith.org/resources/lectionary-commentary/yeara/2014-07-20/proper-11)

<sup>2</sup> Feasting on the Word

<sup>3</sup> Kirk, J.R. Daniel, [www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2151](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2151)

Our pain, our suffering, is not a sign of death. It is a sign of wanting more. Of *needing* more. It is a sign of the hard work it takes to *get* more. To recognize our relationship with God and accept that we are heirs of glory and heirs of God's work. We are children of God, just like Jesus. And so, if we have the same cares that Christ had, our suffering will be Christ's suffering. We cannot have the same cares and not hurt when we are disappointed, when we see pain, when we see enslavement.

Our pain, our suffering, have to be labor pangs, the pain of birthing something new and beautiful. When we don't feel pain, when we don't *remember*, when we don't acknowledge the suffering of the world, there cannot be anything new. There cannot be any excitement over new birth. There cannot be any joy in the signs of God's *love* in our world. Because those signs are everywhere. The pain of our care, the pain of our labor, is bearing fruit.

Let your *hope* be in your suffering, in your patience, in your persistence. Let your hope be in God's love, the love that brings meaning to the *whole creation* groaning in labor pains. It hurts because you are sharing the cares of God, and a beautiful world will be born of it.

Amen.