

SERMON TITLE: “All Things For Good”

TEXT: Romans 8:26-28

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

BY: Ryan Dueck

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Well, I’m going to start this sermon in a bit of an unusual way, but this is an unusual Sunday and an unusual sermon, so I suppose that’s OK...

I’m going to start by simply saying thank you.

- Over the last four months or so, since we announced that we were moving back to Alberta, we have experienced, in a profound and meaningful ways, the love and support of this community
- To everyone who has dropped in for a visit, shared a conversation over coffee, invited us into your home for a meal, given us a card or a gift, sent an email or a text... the list goes on...
- On behalf of Naomi, Claire, and Nicholas... Thank you!

This Sunday has been looming rather large on my horizon for a while now. Mostly, when I have thought about it, it has produced a combination of excitement and anticipation, and dread.

I have been excited to turn the page, both for us, and for Neighbourhood Church. I am excited for what comes next, both for our family, and for you.

But I don’t like to say goodbye. There is sadness with goodbyes and that makes this harder.

This has been a difficult sermon to write, so it might be a bit rambling and disjointed—I hope you will extend me some latitude on my last Sunday ☺.

I’ve often told people that my sermons are preached, first and foremost, to myself, and this is certainly the case today.

I’m going to depart from the usual script a bit and use a prop this week (flower on pulpit).

This is a pansy. But not just any pansy... There is a story behind this one.

A few months ago, Kalina Hunter was selling little flowers as part of a Young Entrepreneur event at her school. Natasha Friesen picked one up for me and for the other members of the office staff, and it has been sitting on my windowsill ever since.

When I first got this pot, there was nothing but a tiny little green shoot in there. You could see it, but it was very small, very unimpressive... It didn’t really look like it was going to amount to much (our cold spring had something to do with this!).

And so I watered it, I put it in the sun (on the rare occasions when the sun made an appearance this spring) and then, slowly but surely, it started to grow.

Every once in a while, someone else would remark on how big it was getting, and ask me what I was doing to help it grow.

I would usually make some smart-alecky comment about how it was the obviously superior care it was receiving, but the truth was that I wasn't doing anything special. I watered it, put it in the sunlight, and that's about it.

I have looked at this little flower often over the last few months as I have reflected upon our upcoming transition. It has served as a kind of visual metaphor to me about my own development as a pastor and the role that this church has played in this.

Three years ago I was probably a lot like that little green shoot—I had no idea what it meant to be a pastor, I was inexperienced, maybe even unimpressive... there was lots of room for growth.

And this church provided the conditions for growth.

Many of you have remarked over the last little while about the ways in which you have noticed that growth in me over the last few years.

I have appreciated these comments very much, but looking at this flower every day has served as a constant reminder that growth does not happen automatically, nor is the plant itself solely responsible for the growth.

All growth requires the right conditions, and the love of this church has provided these for me.

As I think ahead to what the future holds for Neighbourhood Church, I am confident that whoever you call to serve you next will experience these same conditions—love, support, forgiveness, acceptance, patience, wisdom, encouragement, challenge, guidance...

I have experienced each of these over the last three years, and I am profoundly grateful for this.

There are some of you who may have already heard some version of this story, so I apologize in advance... (It's getting harder and harder to remember what I have said where 😊).

But, as Shawn Scheer “encouraged” me yesterday, “nobody really remembers what I say in my sermons anyway, so just repeat yourself!”

Three years ago, when Naomi and I began to consider Nanaimo as a post-graduation destination, one of the things that made me hesitate was the name of the church.

As a student of theology, the names of things *mattered* to me. *I wanted to know*, when I looked at the sign in front of a church, what that church believed, where they fit on the

denominational spectrum, what kind of preaching, liturgy, music style, and prayers I could or could not expect.

The name “Neighbourhood Church,” at least initially, was not high on my list of clear and definitive names. “Neighbourhood Church? What on earth does that mean?

What *kind* of church is it? A Baptist church? United? Evangelical Free? Christian Reformed? Pentecostal? Are they even a *Christian* church?

And what about the “neighbourhood” part? *Which* neighbourhood? Harewood? Jingle Pot? Brechin Hill? Hammond Bay?

Neither part of the name—the “neighbourhood” or the “church” seemed to meet my criteria.

Well, obviously the name “Neighbourhood Church” was a relatively minor barrier in our decision-making.

And over the course of the last three years, my view of the name has completely changed.

Why? The reason is very simple. We have found neighbours at Neighbourhood Church.

I have seen *other* people find neighbours here.

Most importantly, I have seen people consistently try to *be* neighbours here—in the biblical sense, in the Luke 10 (Good Samaritan) sense of someone who would meet people in their need, regardless of social status, race, age, etc.

There are many stories that come to mind...

I think of a little old couple named Walter and Iris King that came to our church a few years ago because they were “in the neighbourhood” and needed neighbours.

They were only with us here for a short time, but I think they found neighbours here.

I think of the new families who have come to be a part of us and whose gifts we have come to appreciate and rely upon.

I think of the many ways that the people of this congregation have expressed “neighbourliness” to the people of this city, whether through outreach projects, pitching in to help out a friend in need, coming together for meals... The list goes on.

I think of the thank you notes from the guys at the jail for the gifts for their kids at Christmas or for the treats that members of this community so faithfully brought to them every six weeks.

I think of the various people who drifted in during the middle of the weeks—people looking for money, or for a ride across town or to the ferry, or looking to be redirected to someone

who could help more fully. Even in these passing encounters, I think these people found neighbours at “Neighbourhood Church.”

Are we perfect neighbours here? Do we always get it right? Has everyone who has walked through these doors experienced what I am describing?

No. Like every other church on the planet, we are a work in progress.

But following Jesus means always trying better love God and our neighbour, and I have seen this lived out among you, here at Neighbourhood Church.

But now we are moving to a new Neighbourhood, new neighbours, new people to be neighbours too... and there is sadness—for us, as well as for you.

Over the last few weeks, I have been thinking about how to understand what I am feeling about this transition theologically.

I have been trying to locate in Scripture the mixture of sadness and celebration that I am feeling, and that others have told me that they are feeling as we prepare to close this chapter of the story.

Because one of the things I am convinced of is that what we believe as Christians, with our brains and with our lives, should have something to say about everything we experience, including mornings like today.

I am convinced that as a community of faith, goodbyes ought to be deeper and more joyful and hopeful among us, even if there is still sadness, because of what we believe about God’s story and our stories and how the two fit together.

The passage I have chosen for this morning is a short one, Romans 8:26-28.

READ ROMANS 8:26-28

How does this passage locate a morning like this in the life of our community? In at least three ways, I think:

1. When we are feeling weak, we can be confident that the Holy Spirit intercedes *for* us.

When we don’t know how to articulate what we are feeling, or how to process what is going on, or how to express our hopes and joys and thanksgivings, we can trust the one who lives within us, the one who is always leading and guiding us and conforming us into the image of Christ, is searching our hearts, and understands us better than we understand ourselves.

Most importantly, we can be confident that the Holy Spirit’s intercession for us when we are feeling weak is always in accordance with the will of God.

This has been a source of immense encouragement to me over the last little while as I have walked through the very mixed experience of moving from one very good thing to what we anticipate will be another very good thing, and I hope it can be for you, as a church, as well.

We don't know exactly what the future will hold for our family, just as you do not know what it will hold for this church family.

But in both cases, there is a deep conviction that as God's people our paths are held by God himself, and that our discernments and decisions are guided and shaped by the Holy Spirit.

2. In all things, God works for good.

I think it's important to note what this verse is *not saying*.

It *doesn't* mean that all things are good. Often this is how we hear this passage interpreted—what you are going through may *seem* bad, but if you could only see it from God's perspective, you would see that it was good.

Paul does not say that all things are good—he, of all people, knows about hardship and suffering (e.g. 1 Corinthians 11:16-29). He, of all people, knows that the life of faith is not a one-way ticket to enjoyable circumstances.

What Paul says is that *in* all things, God *works* for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Each one of our lives is characterized by good things, bad things, and mixed things.

As a church, you know this very well. You have been through some incredibly good times as a church—times when the presence of God, and the unity of the Spirit are evident, and all seems right with the world.

But you have been through some hard times, as a community, times that seemed overwhelming, and disorienting, and painful, and confusing.

And, now, looking back, you can see how God was able to bring about what was good even in those things.

That doesn't mean that the difficulties you endured were good in themselves, or that they were necessary, or that God wanted them to happen, or that the pain of hard times doesn't remain ...

But even out of dark times, good has come. Relationships have been strengthened and deepened. Faith has been tested and emerged stronger and more hopeful. I'm sure you could add your own examples of the good that has emerged out of hard times.

What Romans 8:28 teaches us is that there is nothing in your life, my life, the life of this church—nothing in the whole world—that God is not working to bring goodness out of, for those who have cast their lot with him.

For those of us who love God and have been called according to his purpose, we can be confident that in all things—good things, bad things, sad things, even difficult goodbyes... God is working to bring about what is good.

So what is good?

It can still sound pretty trite to say that whatever we're going through, whatever the ups and downs of life feel like, God is working for good.

Perhaps you are thinking, well that sure sounds nice, and I'm glad God's working for good in all things, but how does that change anything for me *right now*?

It's a tough question, but I think what Paul is asking of us in Romans 8 is for us to re-imagine our circumstances according to the truth of God.

He is telling us that, as followers of Jesus, the reality of a God who is using all of the ups and downs of our every day experiences, all of our relationships, all of our beginnings and endings, all of our hellos and goodbyes, to bring about what is good—this reality is TRUER and STRONGER and MORE REAL than how it sometimes feels.

It takes faith and hope to live as though what God has done and is doing and will do in Jesus Christ is *more real* than the experiences of our lives and how they feel when we are going through them.

But this is what it means to be people of faith. This is what it means to trust that our Storyteller is good and that he can be trusted to incorporate everything we experience into the story he is telling.

3. Finally, I think one of the implications of Romans 8 is nothing good in God's world is ever lost or wasted.

That means that no goodbye in the kingdom of God is the last word, and that *all goodness is something to celebrate!*

We, as those who belong to Jesus— we who have been let in on the mystery of the universe—we know that what is good, and true, and lovely, and pure in this world remains.

We know that even though all of the good things we experience here are temporary, goodness has staying power in God's world because what is good ultimately comes from God.

These last three years have been good.

We are a part of you, and you are a part of us, and this will remain the case.

Lives intersect for long seasons and short seasons and in-between seasons, and we leave our marks on one another, and God uses these things to shape us, to inspire us, to encourage and heal us, to grow us up, to conform us into the image of his Son.

Neighbourhood Church is part of our story now; part of what God *has* used and will continue to use to bring us to maturity as his followers.

You are one of the very good gifts God has given for our journey.

And we are a part of your story now, too. We are part of the story that God will continue to write about and through “Neighbourhood Church.”

It is a good story. It is a story that will undoubtedly have all kinds of exciting twists and turns in it in the future.

My prayer is that it will continue to be a story of people *finding* and *being* good neighbours; that you will continue to be a place and a people who provide the right conditions for the growth of faith, hope, and love (flower).

My prayer is that many more stories will come to be a part of this story.

(We will be back to check up on you!)

God always works for good—for you, for us... in all things.

This is the promise of God, to we who love him and are called according to his purpose.

All things... for good. Nothing good is lost.

Thanks be to God.

Benediction:

We *KNOW* that in *ALL THINGS* God works for the *GOOD* of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Followed by Romans 15:13