

The Future is Friendly

Romans 8:18-28; 37-39

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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A few weeks ago, I got an email from a pastoral colleague. It had been sent out to probably twenty or so of us who are all in pastoral ministry.

My colleague was conducting something of a survey about what some of our pastoral practices during this pandemic were.

Among his questions was this one: “How are you preaching during this pandemic?” Are you focusing more on pastoral care and comfort? Are you pressing in on some of the issues of the day? Are you keeping things simple or diving deep into complex and potentially divisive matters?

I thought about that question for a while. This is the fifteenth Sunday that we have been physically separated. Of those fifteen, I have preached eleven sermons into a camera (although today, happily, we have a few people present!). It has been a time utterly unlike anything I have experienced in my twelve years of pastoral ministry.

So how *have* I approached preaching during this pandemic?

Perhaps it would be better to ask you than me on this one. But I *think* my sermons have focused more even than usual on hope.

And not just a generic hope that things will “hopefully” turn out well in the end once COVID-19 is nothing a bad memory, but about the uniquely Christian hope that has been proclaimed and believed in good times and bad throughout the two thousand plus year history of the church.

I thought that hope would be an appropriate theme on this first Sunday where we are *kind of* back in the building for corporate worship.

These last three and a half months have not been easy. They have not been easy for you, I know. Some of you have been unable to visit spouses without appointments and masks. Some have not seen kids or grandkids for long periods of times. Some have had long stretches of loneliness and despair.

We are all struggling with this in our own way, I think. Even as restrictions are lifted and we slowly get back to normal life, it's easy to worry about the future.

What will our new normal will be? Will we spend the next year feverishly disinfecting everything we touch and policing the distance between one another and hiding behind masks?

Already, I'm growing a little weary of being told where to stand in public places, of filling in two-page questionnaires just to go to the dentist, of reading endless signs about ever-changing protocols everywhere I go. I'm getting tired of being viewed as or viewing others as a potential threat.

On the positive side, my hands have never been cleaner. 😊

How is normal life even possible amidst these kinds of constraints? How is *church* possible amidst these kinds of constraints?

There is so much uncertainty in everyday life these days. And when little seems reliable or predictable, when much seems overwhelming and confusing, when all around we hear voices of fear and anxiety and panic and hysteria, we are desperate for hope. We cling to hope. We *need* hope.

In the early days of the pandemic, the American journalist Andrew Sullivan wrote an article called "How to Survive a Plague." In it, he said this:

Living in a plague is just an intensified way of living. It merely unveils the radical uncertainty of life that is already here, and puts it into far sharper focus.¹

For many, these last four months have indeed sharpened our focus.

¹ <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/03/andrew-sullivan-how-to-survive-the-coronavirus-pandemic.html>

Things that once seemed important, recede in significance. Things we once took for granted have become more central. We have been reminded of the vital importance of human connection and relationship because we have felt the absence of these.

And perhaps we have re-examined our faith, our most fundamental beliefs about the word. Perhaps we have been more prone to ask ultimate questions about the meaning of life, the meaning of times of trial, and about what, ultimately, we can hope for?

This is where the church must have something to say.

I read a lot of articles blog posts, listen to a lot of podcasts, and get a lot of emails and texts where people are talking about what the church should be doing in light of issue x.

The church should say more about racism. The church should say more about following health protocols in the pandemic. The church should say more about politics and policing and sexuality and climate change and whatever else is dominating the news of the day.

I think the church *should* be a place where hard conversations about hard issues are possible. I don't think we should ever shy away from questions about how the gospel informs our responses to these things.

But too often, it can feel like the church just lines up according to whatever political ideology is preferred by the majority of its members (conservative or liberal) and has virtually nothing unique to say *as* the church.

Richard Beck, a psychology professor, theologian, and blogger that I admire from Texas, wrote about this recently in a post called, "Why God Matters."² He looked at a sampling of progressive Christian voices online and analyzed what they were saying the midst of this pandemic.

Very often, he said, Christian sermons and articles and blog posts during the pandemic reduce to science, self-care, and social work.

Congregations are exhorted to listen to the health professionals, who tell us how to navigate the pandemic, the therapists, who tell us how to take care of ourselves and those we love, and

² <http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com/2020/05/why-god-matters.html>

the community activists, who tell us what we should be doing to address this or that social problem.

This is all fine advice, Beck says, but the church isn't necessary for any of it.

And God isn't necessary either, unless possibly as a thin justification for these projects that comes in the back door.

Beck closes his article with these words:

Christians and churches need to articulate why God matters, beyond science, self-care, and social work. This, I think, is the theological labor of our time.

I agree. This is the theological labour of our time.

I think that the apostle Paul would say that hope is what the church should have to say. This is the theological labour of our time and every time.

Many commentators say that this passage as a part of the climax of the entire book of Romans. In this one short passage, Paul sums up the whole drama of God's story.

First, Paul acknowledges that everything is not all right in the world.

Paul's language in this passage is very vivid—it is the language of groaning.

We groan when things aren't right. It is an expression of dissatisfaction with the present and longing for improved circumstances. It can be a howl of pain or a cry for help.

Many of us have been groaning for the last few months!

And here Paul teaches us that it is not just human beings who groan, but all of creation. In some mysterious way, creation itself is longing for everything to be all right.

God made the world with very specific intentions—for human beings to have a very specific role as grateful stewards of a good creation. We have not done this, and our world suffers because of this.

Paul describes this as creation being “subjected to frustration” not by its own choice but by the will of the one who subjected it.

To put it bluntly, God created a world where it was possible for things to get messed up. And we have done so. And we continue to do so.

So, just like us, Paul knows, the church in Rome knows that everything is not all right.

Second, Paul assures us that liberation, freedom and hope are coming.

Creation groans. But creation also waits expectantly. For what? For “the children of God to be revealed.”

In other words, for the proper relationship between God, human beings, and the world to be restored.

This is a big picture of hope.

At times, I think, Christians have had too small a view of hope. At times, we have thought that “hope” meant simply going to heaven as individuals when we die.

There have been times in Anabaptist history where we have thought of our job as to be a kind of “holy huddle” whose only job was to survive this evil world without being contaminated too much by it so that we could escape it into heaven one day.

But this is not the hope of Scripture. It is certainly not the hope of Romans 8.

Instead, we get a vision of God redeeming and restoring all things. Wounds healed, wrongs righted, sins forgiven, justice and mercy coalescing into God’s creational intent.

Romans 8:21 says:

[T]he creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

Somehow, the redemption of human beings and the restoration of our proper role in God’s world, leads to the liberation of the whole world.

Everything put back together again as it was intended to be.

All that is good and pure and true and beautiful and praiseworthy and excellent will find its place in God's new world, while everything that is false and ugly and deceitful and impure will fall away.

This is a big and beautiful hope.

Third, and finally, Paul encourages us to be patient.

Waiting can be hard! We have certainly found this out over the last four months.

But Paul reminds us that patience is an important part of the Christian life.

Tomáš Halík is a Roman Catholic priest who spent many years ministering in an underground church in the Czech Republic during the officially atheist years of communism.

After the darkness of that time, he concluded that the main difference between Christians and atheists is not primarily a difference in intelligence or morality or even spiritual openness. The main difference was patience. Christians were more patient.

Both look at a world where everything is not all right, but Christians haven't given up yet.

Patient hope, according to Halík, is one of the best witnesses we can put on display in a world that gives up on God too easily.

It won't always look like everything will be all right. Paul knows this. But Paul reminds us that "hope that is seen is no hope at all (8:24)."

There is a sense in which Paul is saying that if it were obvious, it wouldn't be hope!

Christian hope is not about pretending the world is better than it is or that we are better than we are! The world is messed up and we are sinful and broken people.

Christian hope is anchored in the conviction that God has entered the mess and has begun the restoration project.

So, in short, this is Paul's message in Romans 8.

1. Creation groans; everything's not ok
2. God has promised a hopeful future that involves us but does not depend upon us (which is good news)
3. In the meantime, our task is patient hope and courageous, Christ-like love

This is a message that only the church can give. This is a hope that the church must proclaim.

Perhaps you're wondering about the title of my sermon this morning. "The Future is Friendly?" What on earth does that mean?

Well, I have shamelessly stolen an advertising slogan from the telecommunications giant Telus by way of an article that my brother recently for a magazine put out by Columbia Bible College.

You've seen the Telus ads, right? Usually they involve cute animals on pure white backgrounds with the tagline "The Future is Friendly" making an appearance somewhere along the way.

I'm not sure what piglets or alligators have to do with a friendly future, but they're cute. I guess cuteness inclines us to believe in a friendly future (or at least to buy Telus products). The future is friendly because we have the technology!

This slogan lodged itself in my brain this week as I read Romans 8.

From our vantage point on June 21, 2020, in the middle of a pandemic, the future doesn't *look* particularly friendly. It's not obvious that there won't be hard days ahead.

But we remain people of hope. Hope that we can see is no hope at all, as Paul reminds us in verse 24.

And as Christians our convictions about the future do not depend on how things look at any given moment but upon the character and promise of God.

Ultimately, as Christians we can say something like "The Future is Friendly" because of the promise of verses 38-39.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It is the love of God that is the source of all our hope for the future. This is simultaneously the simplest and most profound message that we, as Christians, have to proclaim.

God's love is the strongest, deepest, truest, and most expansive thing in the universe. It transcends the difficulties of any particular moment.

Our groaning, and the groaning of all creation is temporary. It will not last forever. God's story is not over yet.

The future will not necessarily be *easy*, but it *is* friendly. Because Jesus Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the Lord of the past, the present, and the future.

The future is friendly because God is there. And because God is love.

May God help us in these days of pandemic, as summer approaches, to be people of patient and courageous hope, secure in the knowledge that amidst all of the separations that are part of life right now, there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God.

Amen.

