

July 30, 2017
Romans 8:28-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

“We know that all things work together for good,” Paul wrote. A beautiful act of trust. As if there are no bad situations. Everything will turn out in the end. We’re doing all right... except for Galda Gallagher’s sons, Gary and Brian, who are grieving the death of their mother. She was in her 90s and had a good life, so *maybe* her death and their grief could work into something good. But what about the family up the street whose twins drowned this week? Those toddlers were young and vulnerable. The family will never know what life might have held for them. How will that situation work into something good? And what about the environment that is rapidly changing, with an estimated 30% of all species to be extinct within the next 30 years? Can God work something good from this destruction? And what about the current wars happening around the world, causing more than 150,000 deaths each year and countless psychological, social, and environmental impacts? With no way to repair the harm caused, and no easy way to peace, can God work *anything* good out of this mess? How will God bring something good out of the chaos that reigns? And what about us? The needs seem bigger than our strength and service. Our doubts seem bigger than our faith. Can God bring good out of our humble faith? (pause)

The list of the things that don’t seem capable of goodness – even God’s goodness – quickly goes from nothing to something to everything. And there’s an equally long list of things that separate us from God. Read any newspaper, visit any food pantry, talk with anyone on welfare or with chronic mental health issues. The possibility of “all things working together for good” seems laughable.

... and yet, we are so desperate for good news, so hopeful that it might actually be true that we are cautiously optimistic when we read Paul's words. For to say that something could not be worked into good is also to say that it is irredeemable. And "irredeemable" is too far in the other direction. God's love and grace, and Christ's resurrection theoretically make all things redeemable – even the worst of the worst and the most impossible situations. But theological theories are different than our everyday realities. We live with the names and situations that are desperate for redemption.

One theologian said that this verse in Romans is the hardest verse in the Bible to believe. Harder to believe than the miracles and healings and dreams and prophecies. Angel visitations, a person swallowed by a whale, and the feeding of 5000 people with only a few loaves of bread are easier to accept than this small, innocuous verse. "All things work together for good". For the implications of these simple words go against all that we see and smell and touch in this world. The implication is that the most horrific headlines hold seeds of grace. Starving children receive mercy. Terrorists become peace-bringers and peace-keepers.

When translators work with the ancient manuscripts of the New Testament, there are always variations between manuscripts. One scribe's handwriting might smudge a word, sending a translation down one direction. Another scribe's misspelling of that smudged word sends translators down a completely different path. With this particular verse, instead of what we read ("all things work together for good"), some manuscripts read, "In all things God works for good." This is a subtle and significant difference. It honors the awesome possibilities that God sees, and hints at the potential impossibilities we see. So that whatever the situation, God is acting with goodness and justice and love and mercy. Whatever the subject, there is a chance for light and life. This is the heart of God's redemptive story in scripture.

In all things God works for good. From the flood, God brought new life. God redeemed Abraham and Sarah (who couldn't have children) and brought new life in their son, Isaac. God worked for good when Hagar and Ishmael were cast into the desert. When the Israelites fell into poverty and desperation and slavery in Egypt, God worked goodness through Moses and Miriam and Aaron. Despite generations of disobedience, God redeemed the people and gave them a promised land, and peace, and prosperity. And on and on and on the tale of redemption went through the people and the prophets and Jesus. In all things, at all times, with all people, God worked goodness into creation. God redeemed potentially irredeemable situations. God worked good into them and did not abandon them. This is the good news. This is the Gospel.

So it must be with our own lives. The chaos and destruction that we see and experience are overwhelming. Through Paul's words here, and the larger narrative in scripture, God takes the mess, the misery, and works them into goodness at the end of the day. Nothing is irredeemable. That means the grief, the violence, the pain – God works into something good.

Over the past 8 months I have gotten far fewer hours of sleep than I would have liked. Even with proper planning, sleep deprivation affects mental health and dexterity, so that you don't think as quickly or as coherently as you do with uninterrupted rest. Sleep deprivation is proven to cause accidents, prevent memory retention, diminish critical thinking, lead to depression, impair judgment, prevent cortisol production (thus making you look older), and increase weight gain. In short, not getting enough sleep is very bad. Adam and I expected to suffer a bit after Huck was born, but no amount of intellectual knowledge about sleep deficit prepared us to actually live with it. One night recently, as I stumbled through the house in a fog, I simply started sobbing. I was too tired to deal with a reasonably simple problem of a teething baby. I absolutely could not think through the situation, too tired to care. Just tired. A friend told

me later that this is why we take cute pictures during the day. Because after weeks and months pass, we don't remember the utter exhaustion and pain as it was in the moment (though we may have a vague sense of it having been there). We look at the pictures and remember the good moments. We forget that we hadn't slept the night before, or that was the 6th outfit of the day, or that was the only smile we saw on a day of fussy teething. Nope. The pictures we see work into something good in our minds. It is already true for me. look back at Huck's first days and weeks, and don't recognize him because of how he has changed. I've mostly forgotten the pain of his time in the NICU. Last month's sleep deprivation is past. (I only know last night's. 😊) I look at his pictures and think, "what a miracle. What a blessing. How good God has been to us."

Perhaps this is a sense of the eternal long view that God has. The individual moments of hardship and despair pass away in the rearview mirror of history. Everything is redeemed through time and grace. Everything is worked into goodness. There's no other option because, eternally, there is nothing apart from God's goodness.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God. There is no one and nothing that can oppose God's goodness and loving with equal and opposing force. Nothing is bigger or better or more powerful than God's love; therefore, all things can and do and will work together for good. Because nothing can separate us from the love of God. Nothing. Neither death nor life can separate us from the love of God. The way you live, the way you die, the things that happen around you or because of you – they cannot separate you from God's love. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Neither angels nor rulers can separate us from God's love. The supernatural forces at play in the world and beyond cannot tempt you or coax you beyond God's reach. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Neither things present nor things to come. The horrific headlines on today's front page, the terrible ones to follow on tomorrow's front

page, and the people and places whose lives are detailed in those headlines – those are not separate from God’s love. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Nothing can separate them from the love of God. Powers cannot separate us from God’s love. Politics and business cannot live outside God’s love for long. For nothing can separate us from the love of God. Neither height nor depth can keep God’s love away from us. We cannot go too far away. We cannot run or hide where God can’t find us. Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

And whatever may seem to separate us from God – the aforementioned things or more simple realities like family drama or laziness or busyness – they will not win the day. In all these things, and more, God works something good.

Presbyterians tuck ourselves into these verses, and draw forth an eternal spring of grace and love and mercy. While other Christians say that there are things we do to separate ourselves from God, that there are things we need to do to get back in God’s good graces, Presbyterians disagree. Based on Paul’s words here and the larger story in scripture, we see redemption. We see God’s steadfastness. And even though we may go far afield, nothing can separate us from the love of God. This pushes some Christians to even say that while hell may exist, it is an empty prison. For if someone were to remain in hell, that person would be separate from God. And as Paul wrote here, we cannot be beyond God’s reach. **Nothing** can separate us from the love of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.