



Proper 12, The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
July 26, 2020

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sometimes we hear people say that life has a way of working out. And sometimes that's true. I'm reminded of a story of two friends, Sean and Jack. It seems they walk into a bakery and Sean says to Jack— "let's have a contest and see which of us can walk out of here with three donuts without paying for them." Jack agrees and promptly snags three donuts off the display case and slips them into his jacket pocket while the baker isn't watching.

Sean then walks up to the counter and says to the baker, "hey, would you believe that I can take three of your donuts and magically teleport them to another location?" The baker is suspicious but intrigued, "okay, go ahead and show me," he says. Sean then eats three donuts, one after another, and stands there smiling. The baker angrily asks "where's the magic in that?" and Sean says "take a look in Jack's pockets!"

So things worked out well for Sean, but not for Jack. Sean probably left the bakery agreeing with the sentiment that "life has a way of working out" while Jack left under very different circumstances, probably in handcuffs.

This question of whether, and how, life has a way of working out, comes to my mind as we hear today's text from Romans and St. Paul's statement that "all things work together for good for those who love God." What do those words mean? In one sense, this passage from Romans is one of the most encouraging sections in the Bible – assuring us that all things will work together for good and that nothing "in all of creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Yet, at the same time we hear these powerful words of hope, St. Paul also gives us a stark acknowledgment of how exceedingly difficult life can be: He recognizes that we do face hardship, distress, and danger, even going so far as to say that for God's sake we are "being killed all day long." It sounds a little bit like life in the midst of a pandemic.

What is St. Paul's basis for simultaneously acknowledging just how terrible life can be while at the same time hopefully asserting that all things will work together for good? His confidence in the face of struggle is rooted in his vision of who God is and what God is doing in the world. If you read through the previous seven chapters of Romans, you can see a systematic description by St. Paul of what he believes about God. He believes that God is loving community as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He believes that God created all of humanity so that we could live forever as the adopted children of the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. And he believes that this adoption has taken place by the Son becoming human as the man Jesus Christ and, in doing so, making us the forgiven children of God.

It is from this confident assurance of our secure and unshakeable place within the life of the Trinity that St. Paul views this life, in all its hardship and in all its joy. He simply believes that we are in God and God is in us – and therefore our ultimate destiny is assured, no matter what hardship we may suffer between here and the life of the world to come.

His belief invites us to ask ourselves what we believe. In one sense it doesn't matter what we believe. If, as St. Paul claims, the loving Triune God has adopted us as his children through Jesus Christ, then that is simply the truth of existence whether we believe it or not. But in another sense, it very much matters what we believe, because what we believe about the nature of God, ourselves, and reality will have a profound impact on how we experience reality. It will impact whether we are able to endure hardship with patience and hope and whether we are able to fully experience joy without having it tainted by fear or feelings of unworthiness.

I would compare it to riding a roller coaster. For those who like riding roller coasters the fun is in doing something that feels dangerous while knowing that it is not dangerous. Because of the extensive safety mechanisms and procedures followed by amusement parks, the ride in your car to the park is statistically more dangerous than the ride on the roller coaster. But the ride on the roller coaster feels dangerous because it involves ups and downs, dizzying speeds, and unexpected drops and turns.

Life often feels that way too: life involves ups and down, it comes at us at a dizzying speed, and it is full of unexpected drops and turns. The question of how we experience these twists and turns is rooted in the question of how safe we believe life is. If we believe that we will ultimately arrive at God's intended destination for us, in the same way a roller coaster rider believes that she will ultimately arrive at the roller coaster's in-

tended destination, then we can live through all the twists and turns with the kind of confidence that St. Paul displays in book of Romans.

If, on the other hand, we believe that the very next drop, or the very next sharp turn, may mean our eternal ruin and destruction, then this roller coaster of life is truly terrifying. That's why what we believe is so important – because it determines how we experience everything.

Jesus is extending an invitation to us all today. He is inviting us to believe that God has constructed all the safety mechanisms, and carried out all the safety inspections, on life – and that God knows what he's doing. Jesus invites us to believe that we are loved, that our future is secure, and that by his grace we can make it through whatever life may bring our way. Jesus invites us to believe that “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.”

Amen.