

TOGETHER FOR GOOD

Choosing a very simple, straightforward sermon title can sometimes have surprising results. It did not cross my mind until later to think of other implications. This could be a sermon about marriage, and that phrase “together for good” comes with terror or delight, depending on how that subject is going for us at the moment. Or maybe it could be me announcing that I love our new house and I am never going to leave this parish. “You are stuck with me. We are together for good.” But I am not that audacious or presumptuous in categories so far beyond my authority and control.

There are a couple of really good sermon possibilities in the title as well. The title might imply that we come together to do good and/or that good comes from our being together. I like that topic a lot. Finally, the title reminded me that we are on an eternal journey. In this realm, we seem to come and go, to meet and part, to lose track of each other and find each other. But we are together for good – all separations are temporary. (God says, “In your realm, divorce is a sin (alienation). In my realm, divorce is an impossibility.”) Remembering that has its sobering side. Sometimes we think we would like to break a relationship once and for all. Eventually time or life or eternity will bring us back to face it, to repent, to reconcile and heal. We are stuck with a God of love, who builds all things to operate according to love’s principles, and that is not always fun.

Nevertheless, when I am reminded that we are together for good despite the inherent problems, my heart soars. All the hope and faith and reason for striving connect to the soaring. “Jesus came to cancel out the concept of goodbye.” One more sentence on *this* subject and I will be hooked and off and running, and this will end up being the subject for today’s sermon after all. So back to the passage for today.

The Scripture reading is from the New English translation. The Great Apostle is revealing both his faith and his experience with how God, through the Holy Spirit (when we believe it and allow it), draws all the threads of our lives together and integrates and coordinates everything we are doing and even what is going on around us – and we find ourselves living way beyond our normal capacity. We feel carried, blessed, effective, energized, and amazed at what is getting accomplished, humble in the realization that God has deigned to use us ...

and I now start to pour forth a barrage of words, as everyone does who tries to describe this incredible possibility. Indeed, Paul is growing elated just writing about it, and he is about to break forth, as he sometimes does, with prose that competes with angel choirs. (You remember: *“If God is for us, who is against us?... Who can separate us from the love of Christ?... I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, 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.”* (Romans 8:31-39) You remember?)

Sometimes it’s fun to go back and see what it was that got Paul so excited, that set him off, that inspired him to such utterances. He is writing a letter to some Christian friends he hopes to visit soon. So he talks about his own experience with the Holy Spirit, knowing that will resonate with their experience too. And he starts describing and trying to explain how it feels to be conscious of the Spirit’s presence helping with our lives.

He starts off pretty reasonable, talking about the choices we face between natural life and spiritual life – about some of the chaos of trying to live for God in a world not yet at peace with God. But quickly his gratitude for the Spirit’s presence and guidance and help ascends. The Spirit organizes, coordinates, plans, and oversees everything, and keeps moving everything toward its rightful goal, no matter how it may look to us at any particular moment along the way. The Spirit even reworks or translates our very prayers into what they ought to be – into what our deepest souls would truly pray. That’s the kind of awareness and experience that sets Paul off. If we choose to live for God – if we turn our wills and our lives over to God – that is what awaits us.

I quote to you from Frank Laubach. He is with the Mohammedan Moros on the island of Mindanao in 1930. He makes what I think is an absolute parallel comment to what Paul is saying: “I feel simply carried along each hour, doing my part in a plan which is far beyond myself. This sense of cooperation with God in little things is what so astonishes me, for I never have felt it this way before. I need something, and turn round to find it waiting for me. I must work, to be sure, but there is God working along with me. To know this gives a sense of security and assurance for the future which is also new to my life. I seem to have to make sure of only one thing now, and every other thing ‘takes care of itself,’ or I prefer to say what is more true,

God takes care of all the rest. My part is to *live this hour in continuous inner conversation with God and in perfect responsiveness to his will. To make this hour gloriously rich.* This seems to be all I need think about.”*

It is uncanny to find two such completely similar descriptions of what it is like to live for God – one from Corinth, about A.D. 57, and the other from the Philippines in 1930. It means the option of living this way is really open to us. The Holy Spirit is alive and well and faithful throughout time. We are discovering that the Spirit will still be present with us – will still act in this way – if we want it to *today*. I cannot imagine more exciting news.

Sometimes I find it helpful to have a shorter phrase or statement to remind me of all the richness of such promises and possibilities. In this particular case, while the translation we read is superb, the familiar phrase that represents this concept comes from the King James Version. The words sound good to our ears: *All things work together for good for those who love God*. I am going to request that you memorize that sentence, if it is not a favorite already. And then it is my hope that all of us will quietly promise, right now – alone and together as a church – that we will repeat this phrase to ourselves at least twenty times a day for the next three weeks. If the car breaks down, if the freeway comes to a standstill, if you inherit a million (dollars or debts) – whatever happens, repeat the phrase, twenty times a day, for three weeks.

I hope you can start off believing the statement as truth, because then it has power. But that is a tall order. If your faith is not at that point, you can still memorize the phrase and repeat it twenty times a day as a genuine experiment in faith. You then repeat it as a possibility you want to believe in. And that repetition will be an invitation for the Spirit to get into conversation with you about whether or not it is really true. The Spirit is not above getting into “show and tell” games with us, if we bring our honest doubts. I am not talking about belligerence or defiance; the Spirit just waits patiently for that stuff to pass.

The phrase, again, is: *All things work together for good for those who love God*.

* *Letters By A Modern Mystic*, January 29, 1930 entry entitled “Only one thing now” (italics in original).

Take it slow. *All things work together.* Most of us do see this at least on some level. There is pattern and order. There is far more pattern and order than we notice or realize, but we do notice some of it. Some notice it best in the stars; some in music; some in the seasons or plants or in the intertwining of life – bee and flower, sun and rain, and on to endless musings. We have sayings like, “No man is an island.” We know that the saints of every religion and culture have slowly come to the realization of a greater and greater unity of all things. To identify, to see one’s self in another, to recognize that one person’s fate inevitably affects us all – in some way, we are all aware of such principles. Oh, sometimes we try to “beat the system.” We spend some time trying to ignore such truth or to “live and let live” (in the negative sense). Sometimes we try to make it through a whole day without prayer and pretend it will not hurt anything. But when we are sane, we know better. *All things work together.* Everything is affected by everything else.

Shalom Aleichem tells about an old man standing on a crowded bus. A young man standing next to him asked, “What time is it?” The old man refused to reply. The young man moved on. The old man’s friend was shocked at such rude behavior from this normally kind and generous person. “Why were you so discourteous?” he asked. The old man blushed and answered, “If I had given him the time, next he would want to know where I’m going. Then we might talk about our interests. If we did that, he might invite himself to my house for dinner. If he did, he would meet my lovely daughter. He is handsome. They might fall in love. I do not want my daughter to marry someone who cannot afford a watch.”

Everything is intertwined. *All things work together.* To believe in a Creator is to know this must be the case. Certain principles are established, and that which flies in the face of these principles will meet greater and greater resistance and inevitably fail.

All things work together ... for good. That is a quantum leap of faith: The Creator is good. Therefore, all things work together for good. Most of the actual “faith” of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been that things are neutral – that which is created is neutral – having the possibility for good or evil according to how we use it. It assumes that we are in charge, that we decide – and that God is either uninterested (directly) or nonpersonal, or that God appears in a later scene in the drama. Much of the most religious devotion

of the last two centuries is still irreligious in this regard. It masks an incredible pride. “It’s up to us. We are in charge.” There is a categorical difference between that and what Paul and Laubach claim: finding themselves in a daily, moment-by-moment experience where they are less and less in charge while more and more keeps happening. And we do notice that both of them did indeed seem to accomplish unbelievable things. (In seven years, Laubach was able to inspire half of the 90,000 illiterate Moros to learn to read and write.)

All things work together for good. Some still suspect that a lot of things work for evil. Most think this place is neutral and it’s up to us. And yet there is a significant number of people, especially in churches, who make the jump, claim the positive, and try to live and believe that *all things work together for good.*

All things work together for good ... for those who love God. The New Testament is more cautious than the positive optimist. Sometimes we do not want to believe what Scripture says; we try to make it say more than it does or to make it say what we want to hear. This world is not obedient to its Creator. There is spiritual warfare here. There is alienation and separation here. Things do not work together for good when we stay apart from God – when we try to get safe or secure in our own little kingdoms, instead of reporting for duty under a Leader higher than ourselves.

J. Paul Getty, land investor and oil magnate, was said to be, at one time, America’s richest man. When I read about him, I am not inspired. I do not feel the tremendous drawing power I feel when I read about Jesus, Paul, or Frank Laubach. Rather, I think how much I hope I am not too much like him already (and know that I am). Better to lose the house I love or the job I love – anything – than to be like him. His biographer, James K. Glassman, writes, “He changed his will 21 times, using it as a weapon to punish what he saw as disloyalty. He drove one son to suicide and missed the funeral of another who died at the age of twelve.” Then Glassman quotes Getty’s diary entry from the week of his twelve-year-old son’s funeral – the funeral he did not attend. It says very little, and yet it is one of the saddest comments one can imagine. The entry says: “Funeral for Darling Timmy. A sad day. Send cable to Zone that Aminoil can have 50 percent of Eocenle by giving us 50 percent of Burgan and paying 10 cents per barrel handling.” Doesn’t that bring tears to your eyes?

What a contrast – what a huge difference – between Paul and J. Paul. Can there be any doubt which one we would rather be like? Unbelievably, we know there can be! On some crazy days, in crazy moments, we still dream more of being rich or powerful. Things do not work together for good when we are still in charge of our own lives, separated from our Creator, living with values that are all twisted up and screwy as hell.

The promise is high and incredible, but it carries a warning. And huge chunks of modern Christendom have been ignoring that warning. *All things work together for good for those who love God.* Not otherwise. Not if we are off doing our own thing. If we are, then we set up waves of resistance; we create static in the channels; we swim against the flow of God's plans and exhaust ourselves, at the very least ending up needing help that should never have been necessary in the first place. Even then, God loves to bring the help when we really want it, no matter how little we deserve it. But it cannot work until we turn to be with and go with God.

All things work together for good for those who love God. Twenty times a day, every day, for three weeks. No matter what's happening, no matter whether you think things will be good or troublesome or terrible for you – every time you can think of it, say the phrase. Try to claim it, until you discover what Paul meant and what Frank Laubach was talking about. We are going to want this so much that we will either find it or close this place down and forget it.