

Pentecost 5- Year A- Romans 8:12-25
(July 16-17, 2011)- Intern Travis Wilson

“Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?
But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.”
(Romans 8:24-25)

I have just returned a couple days ago from a mission trip with 9 of our high school youth and 3 other adult chaperones. We spent the week in Sandusky, Ohio engaged in doing work at the Ohio Veterans Home, a Care and Share food pantry, and Crossroads- a shelter facility for homeless people and families. We had a great time; the youth did great work and shared a lot of their life stories with the group. Yet, even with as much fun as we had, I found myself hoping for a lot of things this week. I hoped for more sleep, for much more coffee, for more hours in the day to spend together with our group, to not have to weed another yard or flower bed, and possibly the most important, I hoped not to come unharnessed from any of the rides at Cedar Point. I will bet there are a lot of people who hope for similar things; however, when Paul mentions hope in our second lesson from Romans, I feel quite confident this is not the kind of hope that he had in mind. You see, these are all things I can touch or measure, and Paul wants the Romans to hope for the things they cannot see, the things that cannot be proven, figured out, calculated, or validated by experience alone.

Our second lesson today is a continuation of last week’s message to the Romans. Pastor Bill stressed last week “there is now therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 8:1) Nada! None! Since that is true, we are to live according to the Spirit, the life giving force of God’s world that dwells within us. Living in the realm of the Spirit, for Paul, is to live in the realm of God and to enjoy the life that comes along with it.

Our passage today continues that theme and brings it home, if you will, to those whom he is writing to. “So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh...” (Romans 8:12) but we are debtors to the Spirit who helps us put to death the

“deeds of the body” (Romans 8:14). To live according to the flesh, is to live in ways that draw us away from God; but to live and to be led according to the Spirit is to embrace our identity as children of God. What is it to be children of God? It is to be, as Paul says today, “heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ...” (Romans 8:17) Paul is telling the people of Romans, and us, what our identity is. We are people who are freed up from the destructive part of our lives that seek to turn us away from the good and free us to live as children of God, heirs and co-heirs with Christ to the vast riches of everything that God is about- love, compassion, mercy, justice, and peace.

We have some understanding of what it is to be an heir. The stories that I remember as a child of princes and princesses being heirs to the throne give me some sense of what this is about. Some of us here have probably even been heirs of an estate or some part of inheritance that family members or friends have left us after they have died. This language is nothing new to us, but for the people of the Roman world, this is something new and significant. There were no heirs in the ancient world, you could not expect to get anything from anyone after they died, those things just did not exist. So, for Paul to talk about freedom and being heirs, and even co-heirs with Jesus, is to be given an identity that embraces a connectedness with both God and Jesus. We get the picture here that we, who are children of God, have this sense of absolute togetherness, of oneness with God and Jesus. It is a relationship of absolute love, like that of a child crying out, “Abba! Father!” To live in this relationship, this interconnectedness of love is to live as free people who join in participating in the very heart of God, the very heart that is love for all things.

This is so good! Hearing about how we are so deeply rooted and connected by the love of God frees us from getting beyond our preoccupations in life and ourselves and to live in freedom embracing God’s love for us. Wow! WOW! But, what do we do about life here and now? Ok, I get that I am connected with God and that I am free to live out of love and not condemnation, I am an heir of God’s richness and love; but how do I live freely in a world so filled with fear, terror,

death, disease, and destruction? We live in a world where babies die everyday and no one can tell us why. We live in a world that struggles to provide healthcare to those who cannot afford it or to provide medications to those who need them. On our mission trip, we discovered that we live in a world where homelessness is becoming too common and it affects everyone. We heard the story of a CEO of a company that looked like it would thrive, but after a few years his company just could not make ends meet and he lost all he had. We also played with children who did not have a lot of things in their life and who were so grateful to go swimming in the pool of a YMCA, though most of them did not know how to swim.

We live smack dab in the middle of the struggling and wrestling with the tension of what is and what will be. We wrestle with the yuckiness of this world on the one hand and on the other of knowing that in the end God will make all things new. The apostle Paul knows and recognizes this tension when he writes to the Romans, “we know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:22-23). We groan because we know things are not as they could be, not as God has promised they will be. And here, Paul joins humans with creation so that the whole created world is groaning together, yearning for something better. Creation knows that it is not as it should be either, and perhaps that is the good news for us who struggle with effects of natural disasters- creation groans in pain for itself knowing that destruction is not what is intended for it either.

Paul says that as we are united, both creation and humankind, we wait “with eager longing [eager expectation] for the revealing of the children of God... For in hope we were saved” (Romans 8:19-21). One of the commentators I read this week said that we wait in eager expectation that is like craning the neck to get a better look at what or who is coming down the road. We know that something better is coming, and we cannot wait to see it. Yet, we wait in hope.

We are not strangers to the concept of hoping and longing. We all hope for so many things. We hope for a good future for our lives, we hope to get through periods of change and instability, we have hope for our children that they get better opportunities and lead good lives; we hope to make amends with others. We hope for forgiveness—both that we would have the strength to forgive others for the wrongs they do to us and for the courage to forgive ourselves. We hope for places and spaces of acceptance and peace, we hope for the freedom from disease and depression, we hope for the ability to see strength within ourselves, especially when we feel we are weak. We hope and long for love and even for people who see us as people worthy of loving. In all of this, we do know what it is to be people of waiting and of hoping, we know what it is to be people in need of redemption, in need of someone to set things right.

Paul reminds the Romans, and us, “Hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” (Romans 8:24-25). William Loader says that for Paul, “hope is not golden streets and shinier rewards, but God and God’s presence.” In other words, the hope Paul talks about in Romans 8 is not about hope for going to some pie in the sky place with golden streets, but it is a hope and a longing for God and God’s presence to surround us. Hope that is about God is not something that can always be measured, scientifically proven, or verifiably seen. Hope is about knowing God’s love for all things- humanity and creation alike. Hope for us as Christians is letting ourselves get drawn into the relationship with God and Jesus. This relationship tells us of our identity as children of God. Children who are precious enough to get beyond ourselves and to trust that God gives us worth, healing from sickness and indeed everything we need. Hope is about eagerly waiting for the day when God will make all things new, the day when we will finally know all of the riches God has in store for God’s heirs.

As a faith community, we are people who live together in hope and eager expectation of what is to come. We are a community who embraces the radical love of God who waits and groans with us for the

renewing of all creation. Even as we are joined together in hope, we are also joined together in faith trusting that God's promises are true no matter how slow time seems to pass. I pray, and even hope, that as you go from this place your harness would be unbuckled so that you are propelled into the world to bear witness to the unseen hope that is in you, a hope that will surely change our world.

Amen.