

Lectionary 16A  
Romans 8:18-30

Pastor Wayne Peterson  
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*<sup>18</sup>I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup>For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; <sup>20</sup>for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup>that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. <sup>22</sup>We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; <sup>23</sup>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. <sup>24</sup>For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? <sup>25</sup>But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*

*<sup>26</sup>Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. <sup>27</sup>And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.*

*<sup>28</sup>We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup>For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. <sup>30</sup>And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

It's a cherished bit of Americana – a dad takes his 6-year old son to a professional baseball game. The boy is in awe of his heroes. The dad is reliving his own youthful dreams of being a baseball player. They have some hot dogs, eat some ice cream, and if they're really lucky, they catch a foul ball to take home to remember the day.

That's how it was supposed to happen two weeks ago when Shannon Stone took his son, Cooper, to see their team, the Texas Rangers. Cooper's favorite player, Josh Hamilton, tossed a ball in their direction and Shannon, anxious to make a magical moment for his son, stretched as far as he could to catch it. But Shannon lost his balance and fell over the railing onto the concrete twenty feet below. He died an hour later.

Sarah Deckert spent last Saturday evening helping a friend in Maple Grove pack for a move to Florida. It was after 1:00 in the morning when she headed home to Buffalo. In the same area, a man she didn't know had been stopped for suspected drunken driving. While talking with the officer, he sped off on County Road 81 and ran a red light at 93rd Ave, where he smashed into Sarah's car. Both Sarah and the drunk driver were killed.

Think of any of the thousands of people who are dealing with unemployment or foreclosures on their homes. They went to work each day -- faithful employees, good citizens. But the irresponsible actions of people they never met, who made a lot of money packaging and selling mortgages, caused the economy to boom and then terribly go bust. A lot of good people are hurting through no fault of their own.

These are but recent examples that show us that life is out of control. No matter how carefully we plan, we must realize that the victim of the drunk driver could have been us or someone we love. A natural disaster like a fire, flood, or tornado could ravage our property and wipe out our life savings. Many among us are struggling with the consequences of the recession. The dad who died trying to catch a baseball for his son could have been from this congregation. Life is out of control – or more precisely, life is out of our control. I guess that’s the part that’s most frustrating. We want to be able to do something – anything – to avoid tragedies like this, but aside from taking normal precautions, there’s not much we can do.

It’s because of our lack of control that I find Paul’s words in our passage from Romans this morning to be quite outlandish. He writes, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.”

Life may be out of our control, but Paul wants us to believe that everything is under God’s control. Everything, mind you! Not some things or most things, but everything! How can Paul say that God works for good in everything? Where is the good in the deaths of Shannon and Sarah?

Paul even uses the term “predestine.” Does he really think that every step of our lives is mapped out and we’re just going through the motions of a plot that’s already been written? Predestination is a topic that fascinates a lot of people. The way Paul uses the term and the way it is used throughout the Bible is quite different than the way we generally use it in ordinary conversation. Perhaps the best way to point out the difference is to compare two terms: fate and destiny.

In ancient Greek and Scandinavian mythology, fate was pictured as an iron trap that ensnares people, a trap for which the key is thrown away. Every step of one’s life is predetermined. There is no freedom of the will because everything has already been decided by the gods. You have perhaps heard the expression of being “at the end of one’s rope”? That comes from the Greek view that the gods held a piece of rope for each person. Those who had long ropes lived a long life, and those who had short ropes had a short life. You lived until you came to the end of your rope.

This classical view of fate is an utterly un-Christian concept. We believe that we are not puppets on a string, but that God has given us the gift of free will, the ability to make choices. Of course, with that comes the ability to make bad choices and the responsibility to live with the consequences of our choices and the choices others make that affect us. But that does not mean that whatever happens is dictated by fate, that it is God’s will. The concept of “fate” has no place in the Christian church.

“Destiny”, however, is quite different from fate and is an eminently Christian concept. A destiny is a goal or purpose, much like its related word, destination. God created us with a destiny, and that destiny is to live in a relationship of love with him. We see that destiny clearly in the sacrament of baptism. When we are baptized, the sign of the cross is traced on our foreheads. That cross is the mark of our destiny, reminding us of the great love God has shown us in Jesus Christ and, because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the sure future we have with God for all eternity.

God has had this destiny for human beings -- that they might live in a relationship of love with him -- since creation. And so, Paul speaks of it as pre-destination. Our destiny, our purpose, was set out for us even before we were born.

As for Paul’s statement that in everything God works for good with those who love him, we must realize the context in which Paul can make this seemingly outrageous statement. Paul didn’t live an easy, carefree life. Before his conversion to being a disciple of Jesus Christ, he caused a lot of pain by persecuting the Christian community. We read in the book of Acts that Paul stood by approvingly as Stephen was stoned to death as the first Christian martyr. After Paul became a Christian himself, he experienced that same persecution. He was beaten and stoned and run out of town more times than he cared to remember.

Paul never said that God caused all those things to happen. In fact, at the time they happened he probably asked God that common question, “Why?” Why is this happening? Why don’t things go the way I want them to? Why is my life out of control?

As the years passed and he looked back at what had happened, he saw that even out of the most painful experiences, God was able to bring about something good. He could see that God still had things under control.

At the funerals for Shannon and Sarah, I would hope that the pastor or priest did not read these verses from Romans. When one is experiencing grief, these words seem quite hollow. These are words spoken by Paul in reflection and are most appropriate for us not when our grief is raw and tender, but in reflection, as we look back over the distance of time. It’s only then that we can begin to dimly see the big picture the way God sees it. It’s only then that we can see a loving God working for good in the midst of a world too often filled with evil and pain. It’s only then that we can see that God has things under control in a way that Paul will describe eloquently in the last verses of chapter 8, which we will read next week.