

Romans 8:12-25
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Lead by the Spirit

What captures your attention these days? How have you been spending your time lately? Think about your daily activities. Have certain things grown in importance while others diminish? Are you concentrating on being safe? The things you think about or worry about are clues to what really matters to you. How's your prayer life going?

I walk through our neighborhood and see the same people out walking each day, we nod and greet each other from a distance. Some people want to talk and seem to be lonely. Visiting with them from a distance, I wonder what their lives are like as they return to their homes.

Some share their fears about the pandemic here and everywhere. Some are involved in hobbies they always wanted to pursue, many, including myself, are gardening and baking with renewed energy. Some watched the news a lot at the beginning of this pandemic but now have determined that small doses are better. If you see and hear too much sad and frightening information, it can become a kind of bondage-- can even feed your worst fears.

My husband Jim and share our devotions each morning. We have read Wisdom and many of the Psalms and Esther and most recently finished the book of Job. We are now reading through Acts. These scriptures speak to us in various ways. It's energizing and empowering to realize how our various interpretations help us make sense out of our new reality.

From the time I was a very young child, I have been blessed by a strong sense of God's presence and protection. Despite having a deeply painful childhood, I have come to see my life as a series of cyclical movements of the Holy Spirit. Every time of pain and loss has been followed by a more powerful sense of new growth, rebirth and joy. It is as if enduring these things has not only strengthened me in my faith, but also increased my awe and my delight. And that is where I find myself today.

In case you are wondering, "Is this woman crazy? How can she speak like this? Is she living in the same world as I am? Is she blind and deaf? Has she not heard that we are in the midst of a world-wide pandemic? Doesn't she know that dictators around the globe are increasingly oppressing the very people they are supposed to be serving? Oh yes, and that there are wars everywhere and racism and immigrants in poverty fleeing the violence in their homelands and very few signs of peacemakers?

No, I do not believe I am crazy--Rather that I am greatly blessed. Because of God's gracious and ongoing gift of the Spirit; I am in debt. I owe my life and all the gifts I enjoy to the new life I have been given in Christ Jesus. My life is not my own. I am called to spend my moments and my days sharing the joy and the awe I experience each and every day.

How can I be saying this if I am truly aware of the sinfulness, corruption and brokenness all around me...not to mention my own brokenness? It is only because I have received a spirit of adoption! I have come to know what it is to be one of the Children of God.

I should confess that the words of the Apostle Paul have contributed greatly to my appreciation of what it means to be one of the Children of God. In preparation for seminary, my application required an essay in which I was to describe how I came to be called into ministry. That whole process was, for me, a powerful experience in the renewal of my faith. It began with a series of gentle nudges and then finally it was a roaring wind that rushed through our house in the middle of the night and awakened me--only me-- not my sleeping husband or children! That wind confirmed my call.

Yet it was the writing of that essay that helped me every bit as much as the powerful wind of the Holy Spirit. You see I never had much of an experience of fatherly love. Neither my biological father nor my adoptive father were able to express love in the way a child needs to be loved. That is simply a fact of my childhood. As I wrote that essay, I became aware that in spite of the lack of love from two earthly fathers; it had been the love of our Heavenly Father which had so blessed and carried me all

those years.

My life up until age eighteen was one of suffering and great losses. And yet I was blessed to have been sent numerous parent figures --teachers and priests and nuns and yes--at times complete strangers who shared the Spirit of Adoption with which they were blessed. I have no doubt it was the Spirit who placed them in my path.

My journey has led me to the realization that immediately following every walk of deep suffering; I have been gifted with immense joy. Suffering and joy-side by side--that has been my experience. And oh, how the joy surpasses the pain! Every time!

I want to share a small instance of the multitude of ways in which the Spirit blessed me during my call process. I was a volunteer working at the Child Crisis Center in Mesa when I saw her. Her name was Helen and she was an elderly woman, seated in a rocking chair cradling a battered child on her lap with all the tenderness any human could provide, Gently, yet fiercely rocking that little child; she captivated me completely. Love just radiated all around that room! "I want more of this," I said to myself.

Well, I soon learned that Helen and her husband had been foster parents to 84 children over many years and she wasn't going to let her age stop her then. When I invited her to help me in a fledgling program for pregnant and parenting teens, she turned her home into a classroom! Here was hope in the midst of brokenness. Here was God's love made manifest in a shelter for battered children.

I must confess that I have had many trials since that day thirty-five years ago when I first encountered Helen. Many of you have raised teenagers; so, I know you have groaned inwardly-- and likely outwardly as well. I know I did! Early in my ministry I found myself planting a mission church in Wisconsin when our kids were teens. The call required a move to a new town where our daughter found the high school cliques painfully unwelcoming. We took her to a counselor who also asked to meet separately with me. She asked me some questions, then finally she said, "Well, at least you have hope!" I don't know if it was just because she knew I was a pastor that she assumed I had hope, but let me tell you, clergy are every bit as human as everyone else. And no, I did not have hope at that moment. I was overwhelmed by my numerous responsibilities, not the least of which was parenting two teens.

But her words hit home. Yes, I had hope in some sort of abstract form that was mainly cognitive. Did I believe in the Resurrection and in eternal life? You bet I did! But what I had not yet truly internalized was the real presence of hope in the midst of difficult circumstances --events that were so overwhelming as to make me feel absolutely helpless.

And THAT is exactly where the Spirit comes in. The Lutheran catechism says, "The Spirit calls, gathers and enlightens the saints for ministry." Enlightens! I love this!" The Spirit is ever present with us--and it is present whether we feel it or not. Many times we behave as if the Spirit's presence depends upon our experience of it; yet the very opposite is true: The Holy Spirit is present with us and for us regardless of our awareness of it. The Spirit is continuously available to us whenever we open ourselves and invite its transformative power into our lives. In other words, "We are not in this alone!"

Paul says, "When we cry Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our Spirit that we are children of God..." My dear friend Helen was bearing witness with her care for one of God's broken children that she was herself one of God's Children and therefore an heir of God and a joint heir with Christ. She stepped into suffering and God transformed it into something good. Sometimes we find ourselves in suffering that is not a consequence of our own actions, suffering that we did not choose. And that is the hardest kind to understand. Yet that is a part of our world and has been from the beginning.

Paul says, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us." Are you finding yourself consumed with a sense of futility as we travel together through this wilderness of world-wide pandemic, travesties of justice, poverty, homelessness, and hunger? Do you often feel helpless? Hopeless? Yes? Well, congratulations for your honesty. You are fully human. You are exactly what God created you to be! You are God's beloved Child.

"Ok, you say, but what about the glory that is about to be revealed? When is that coming? I'm not ready to die yet. And I'm also not very patient." You don't have to simply wait for that. As Children of God we are called to awaken and to see and hear new promptings of the Spirit. I believe that each of us-- as part of God's plan, were born for such a time as this and that each of us has a call upon our lives.

Remember that I shared with you my experience of times of great suffering in my life being followed over and over again by great joy? I certainly agree with Paul that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now..." Well, I also believe that God does God's best work in us --and indeed in the whole of Creation in times of crisis. Did you know that crisis and opportunity go hand-in-hand?

Do you not see already the many signs that God is working great good right now? In this time! Right here and right now. A great awakening has begun. I am paraphrasing Thomas G. Pettepiece as I ask you to pray with me:

Lord God, awaken us to the ongoing presence of your Holy Spirit. Open our eyes and our ears to the present glory of God. For our hope is not in ourselves, our technologies, our governments, our laws, our tenacity, our courage, our will, though these things are all necessary to conquer hunger, to defeat this pandemic, to establish justice, to be fully present for those who suffer and to provide assistance according to the gifts you have given us. Show us your will for us in this time of suffering. Remind us that our hope is in you. Amen.