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## Conformed to the Image of his Son

**Romans 8:26-30**

Fr. William Klock

November 12, 2017 – Trinity 22

To say that the world is a mess would be an understatement. How do we, as Christians, respond to the sin, the pain, the suffering, the sickness that's all around us? Sometimes it's easy to know what to do. There's an obvious need and we meet it. Sometimes it's easy to know how to pray. And yet there are so many times when we see things happening in the world that, no matter how hard or how long we pray, it's just not enough. No matter how hard or how long we pray, there just aren't words to express our concern and our sorrow. So often we don't even know *what* to pray. Last Sunday a gunman charged into a church and gunned down dozens of fellow Christians. The image of Islamists beheading a row of orange-clad Egyptian Christians just a few years ago is seared into our memory as are the stories of Christian husbands and fathers murdered for their faith in Iraq and Syria, while their wives and children were pressed into slavery. We pray for them, for their families, for justice for the perpetrators, and yet there's more. The sin, the evil, the hatred—the underlying problems—run so deep we can pray all day and we still feel that we haven't really touched the root problem with our prayers and may not even have the words to express to God our sorrow and the desire to see things made right.

We look at political situations at home and abroad. Our nation and the rest of the world are horribly sick. We murder millions of unborn children every year. Our governments are built and funded on dishonest economic policies that shackle those children lucky enough to be born to crippling debt. We export this economic policy abroad and create misery for millions of people around the world who are already grievously poor. We wage wars against “bad guys” only

to take them down and replace them with rulers and governments that are even worse, while committing atrocities ourselves in the process. And it comes time to vote for our leaders at home and the choice is between Awful Candidate A and Awful Candidate B and no matter who wins, things continue to get worse. We pray and we pray. We pray for wisdom for our leaders. We pray for the conversion of our leaders, so that they might gain a measure of wisdom and sense of righteousness and justice. We pray and pray, but no matter how long we pray, we just don't have the words and the ideas to get to the real root of the problem. Paul writes about our prayers turn into groaning. I don't think I've ever actually groaned out loud in prayer, but it's easy to understand what Paul's getting at. He's writing about a profoundly deep sorrow for the state of the Church and the world and a profound longing to see it all put right, a sorrow and longing that has long since exhausted any words we may have to express it fully.

What Paul says here follows right after his talk about God's sons and daughters crying out with confidence, “Abba, Father”. He ties this wordless, groaning prayer to our calling and ministry as Christians. We are called to bear the good news about Jesus to the world. We are called to bring to bear his lordship and the fruit of the Spirit on the world around us. But, so often, the problems, the sickness, the evil, the suffering are so *great*. What do we do, let alone what do we pray in our longing for that day when Jesus finally sets the world to rights? How do we fulfil our vocation, how do we live it out, when we so often don't even know where to begin? It's this calling and this mission and this hope for the future that give rise to this inexpressible sorrow and longing. This is what Paul gets at in Romans 8:26-30. Here he reaches the climax of the story and the argument he's been building since Chapter 1. In the last paragraph of Chapter 8, which we looked at last Sunday, Paul wrote that the world groans like a woman in labour. In his death and resurrection, Jesus has dealt a death blow to sin and death and has inaugurated God's age to come. We live, he said, in hope. We have a promise of glory, we have a promise of

resurrection and being made new, and Jesus has poured his Spirit into us as a firstfruits or a down-payment on that future hope. It's here and it's now, *but* it's also not yet. We live in the overlap. The old age is passing away and the new age is breaking in. And, somehow, as Jesus' people, full of the Holy Spirit, we are called to be midwives to Creation as it groans to give birth to a new heaven and earth. But how do we do that? It's often overwhelming. In verse 26, Paul is clear: the task is huge and we are weak. Look what he writes there:

**Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.**

We are weak. Brothers and Sisters, it's okay to admit it. When Paul wrote this, he had in mind his fellow Christians being violently persecuted by the Jews and the persecution he knew was soon to come at the hand of the Romans. Some of these very Roman Christians to whom he wrote, would be rounded up by Nero and forced to fight in the arena, they would be fed to the lions, they would be crucified and burned alive. What happens when you pray in the midst of that kind of suffering and evil and come to the end of your words and still haven't touched it? What do we do when we face our own pain and suffering? That sort of persecution isn't the sort of thing we face, but we have our own problems, our own impossible situations. And we pray and we don't have the words. Brothers and Sisters, it's okay to admit our weakness. We are redeemed, but the work of redemption has only *begun*. It's already, but not yet. We hope for glory, but we hope—as Paul said last week—because the fullness of that glory isn't something we can see. It's *future*. We have some sense of it as we read the Scriptures and as we look at the empty tomb and the resurrected Jesus and as we live the life of the Spirit, but most of that glory is still incomprehensible. And yet our calling as Jesus' people is to strain into the unknown ahead and to pull and to pray God's future into the present. You can't do it. I can't do it. *Not alone*. But the Holy Spirit, poured into us in our baptism, knows our groaning—whether

we vocalise it or whether it's simply that inner frustration of not knowing how to pray—and he carries that frustrated and sorrowful groaning to our Father and gives it meaning.

Paul writes that the Spirit “helps” us. Do you remember the story of Jesus’ visit to Mary and Martha’s house in Luke’s Gospel? Mary sat and listened to Jesus while Martha scrambled to prepare dinner and to be a good hostess. She became angry with Mary and insisted that she *help* her with the preparations. The word Luke used to describe the help Martha wanted from Mary is the word Paul uses to describe the help the Spirit gives us. We can’t pray God’s future into the present, but the Spirit comes alongside as we groan and he does what we can’t do by ourselves.

Now, why is this important? If you do find yourself groaning as you pray, sorrowing over the state of things and longing for something better—so much so that you don’t have the words to express it, is there consolation? Or, if your prayers have *not* reached the point of expressing this kind of frustrated sorrow and longing over the state of things, why *should* you cultivate this kind of prayer in your life? Brothers and Sisters, this kind of prayer, this groaning so deep there are no words for it, *is simply our calling and vocation worked out in prayer*. Remember last week, where Paul had us sort of on the hilltop, looking out over redemptive history. And as he’s made this argument in Romans, he’s reminded us of our original vocation—the purpose and calling for which God created human beings in the first place. His Creation was his temple and he created us to be his image-bearers in that temple—to exercise dominion over Creation in the name of God, to be his stewards, to be fruitful and to multiply and to spread that dominion. And, Paul said, last week, because we rebelled against that vocation, because we tried to seize the temple for ourselves, we made a mess of it and now it groans in longing, not just for the day when God will set it right, but for the day when God will set *us* right, *so that* we can

once again exercise our divine vocation over Creation. Creation groans all the more now that Jesus, in his death and resurrection, has inaugurated God’s age to come.

And, as Jesus’ people, longing for that day, living in hope of that day, and already called back to our original vocation, even if the consummation of our redemption is future, we long—or we *should* be longing—to exercise that vocation *today* in whatever limited way we can. We pray, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” And that prayer should move us to be agents of God’s kingdom, agents of his will, seeking to bring the lordship of Jesus and the fruit of the Spirit to bear today. But the specifics aren’t always easy. There are so many things that are out of our control, so many things that are bigger than you and me, so many things that are too far away that “Thy kingdom come...thy will be done” can only be expressed through a wordless, but Spirit-inspired intercession of longing and hoping.

Somehow this kind of prayer produces fruit. Look at verse 27:

**And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.**

As we see the firstfruits of God’s new creation in the resurrection and life of Jesus, as the Spirit works to turn our hearts and minds towards God, he moves us to this deep and wordless prayer of sorrow and longing. The Spirit intercedes for God’s people and he intercedes according to God’s will—again, “Thy kingdom come...thy will be done”—the God who searches and knows our hearts hears that intercession. It’s not just that the Spirit moves us to pray in a certain way that God approves of. It’s that somehow, in some mysterious way, the Trinity is at work in our prayer. Through the Holy Spirit, the very life and love and power of God are at work in and through us. Brother and Sisters, if you think prayer is inconsequential or unimportant, think on this. At the very point of our weakness,

at the very point of our inability to even express our sorrow and longing for the Church and the world, we become the very place where the Triune God, the Holy Trinity is revealed: as we pray through the Son with the Spirit interceding, the Father hears and acts. We are called—we have the *privilege*—of engaging in this kind of prayer for the church and the world—this prayer in which we are caught up in the loving and redeeming dialogue between the Father and the Spirit.

Paul wrote earlier of our hopeful longing for the day when our glory will be revealed—that day when Jesus has finally put the last of his enemies under his feet, that day when the world is fully under his sovereignty and set to rights, that day when we will be fully restored to our vocation to rule and to steward Creation alongside him. And this groaning prayer for Church and world is what our exercise of that glory, our exercise of that sovereignty looks like in practice, right here and right now, in the overlap of the ages. We are called to share in the sufferings of Jesus the Messiah, to follow him by daily, taking up our crosses, so that one day we will be glorified with him. Suffering is the inevitable result of giving our allegiance to Jesus and challenging the false gods and the false loyalties of the old age. Suffering is the inevitable result of standing to proclaim that Jesus is Lord. It is the inevitable result of refusing to take part in the worship of the old gods, of refusing to take part in the injustices of the old age. It is the inevitable result of taking a stand for righteousness, justice, and truth. But we are called to do just this. We are called to lives of personal holiness as we take captive for Jesus that over which we have direct and personal control. But as we anticipate the life of God’s age to come, that day when the world is set to rights and we share in Jesus’ sovereignty, we are, at least in our prayer, called to take responsibility for the whole world. We pray articulately for all those things for which we are able, but for all those troubles, all those sins, all those pains too deep for words to express, our calling and our ministry is to let the Spirit long and groan within us and to know that the

God who searches hearts knows our suffering and hears our wordless prayers.

Paul writes in verse 29 that we are to be conformed to the image of Jesus. To share in his suffering and to groan in wordless prayer for the redemption and reconciliation of the world is part of that. This follows from what Paul wrote back in verse 17: we are fellow heirs with the Messiah, so long as we suffering with him in order that we may be glorified with him. Prayer is funny thing. We often do it because we know we should. We often do it seeking things around us to change. But the key thing that happens when we pray, that we ourselves are transformed. Prayer is one of the ways by which God brings us into conformation with the image of Jesus. Now look at verse 28:

**And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.**

Here's what Paul's saying in this familiar and favourite verse: God knows the mind of the Spirit *and* we know that God works all things together for good for those who love God, *therefore* God works all things together for good for us, after all, we are the ones in whom the Spirit is working. This is the assurance Paul has been pointing us towards. It's not just that suffering is inevitable for us as Christians, but that suffering is the very thing to which Jesus has called us—suffering for the sake of giving him our allegiance, but also a suffering deep in our being as we long for the redemption of all things and as we groan in our prayers for the church and the world. In the midst of suffering, it's really easy to lose hope, especially when there doesn't seem like there will ever be an end and in those situations in which we wonder how God can possibly ever bring good. But Paul reminds us that God never gives up. He always fulfils his promises. The Spirit is the evidence of our adoption as God's sons and daughters in the present and we have a promise of glory and of all things finally working out for good. And that promise is secured by the fact that God

works all things for good to those who...*love him*.

This is the climax of the argument Paul's been working through since Chapter 1. The problem with the world and the human race is that we rejected God, and his goal ever since has been restoring the human race to himself—bringing us to the point where we will love him once again. God's people are always marked out by a love for him. This was the central command of the *torah*: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and *you shall love the Lord your God*." Paul has reminded us of this command several times—mostly to remind us of Israel's failure to love the Lord. He's written that those who are in the flesh never keep God's law. They can't please God and they don't love God. This is why God promised Israel that one day, through his Messiah, he would pour out his Spirit into his people, removing their hearts of stone and replacing them with hearts of flesh and that he would write his law of love on their hearts. The Spirit now does what the law commanded, but could never empower. In the Spirit, God's people finally and truly love him from the heart. The people of Jesus, the people in whom the Spirit dwells, are finally the people who love God—in other words, they—we—are the true keepers of the law and the true Israel.

Paul also points to Jesus' people, the Church, as the new or true Israel when he describes us as being "called according to God's purpose". This is Israel language. God called Abraham so that, through him, he could work out his redemptive plan. Israel was called to represent God to the nations. That plan and that calling were fulfilled in Jesus. The new age was inaugurated in him, but the world awaits its final consummation. And in this overlap of the ages, God calls his Church, his new Israel, as he did the old Israel, to pray and to pull his future into the present. Like Israel, we have been called to show forth the praises of the one true God before the nations. Yes, it means opposition and even persecution, but in this calling we find assurance. God *always* fulfils his purposes. God *will*

accomplish our redemption and the redemption of all things.

Now, finally in verses 29-30, Paul drives this assurance home with five resounding chords: Those whom God *foreknew*, he *predestined*; and those he *predestined*, he *called*; and those he *called*, he *justified*; and those he *justified*, he also *glorified*. Foreknew. Predestined. Called. Justified. Glorified. We in the Reformed Protestant tradition have had a strong tendency to focus on these sentences as statements of an abstract theology of personal predestination and salvation. It's not that that's wrong, but we've tended to miss the larger and, I think, more important context here. Paul's point is that we are called to be conformed to the image of God's Son, *so that* we can then reflect that image into the world—so that we can bring to the world the redemption, reconciliation, and life for which it groans. God redeems us and makes us Christ-like, in order to restore us to our vocation—to serve as priests beside Jesus, the high priest, in the temple of God's Creation. These five concepts, coming here like five great chords crashing on us at the end of a symphony: foreknew, predestined, called, justified, glorified—for Paul they describe Jesus the Messiah, but he then—remarkably—applies them to us. His point being that *what is true of Jesus the Messiah is true of his people*.

It's easy to think of God foreknowing and predestining as some kind of fatalism, but that's not the emphasis of the Old Testament. To foreknow and to foreordain is an expression of love. Think of God's words to Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." That's the sense of what Paul is saying here. But that knowing and calling of God now applies to *all* of his people, not just prophets and apostles, but to all of us, whatever our vocation. Just as Jesus himself was foreknown and foreordained to his ministry of reconciliation and kingship, we are—in the love and grace of God—foreknown and ordained to our own

ministries of reconciliation and stewardship under our King.

We are then called, Paul says. And for him, this is what happens when the good news about Jesus is preached. In response, the Spirit works in the hearts of those who hear it to produce faith, hope, and love. We hear the proclamation that this Jesus, who died and rose from the dead for our sake, is Creation's true Lord and we respond with faith, hope, and love to this sovereign command of the King. We bow the knee, and we give him our allegiance. This is the "obedience of faith" that Paul wrote about back in Chapter 3. It was the obedience of Abraham and of the faithful Israelites, and now it's our response to Jesus' call. It marks us out as members of God's *covenant family*—it marks us out as those who have been justified, which means to be declared to be in the right. And, finally, those who are justified now live with a hope of glory—hope of the day when, like Jesus, we will be resurrected to serve with him before the face of God in a creation made new. Predestined, called, justified, and glorified. With these last four words Paul finished the argument he's been working through since Chapter 1. Like a carpenter building a house, Paul hammers home these last four nails to hold everything in place.

Now, let me give you a visual by way of conclusion. When the people of Paul's world thought of justice and peace, they looked to Caesar. He had his "gospel". With his sword, he brought peace and justice to the empire. And yet Paul reminds us that Caesar's gospel and Caesar's peace and justice are cheap imitations of the gospel of Jesus and of the true peace and justice he brings. Paul hints here at the way that Jesus' gospel makes its way into the world and at the way it will eventually conquer the world. Caesar's rule was made visible around the empire in his statues. He declared himself the son of a god. On his death the priests declared that he had ascended to heaven. Over time, temples were built to house Caesar's images. People came to worship them, but more than anything else, those statues

reminded the people whose empire it was that they lived in. Those statues reminded them who the king was and that they were his subjects. All those images of Caesar proclaimed his gospel, reminded people to look to Caesar for peace and justice, and demanded people give Caesar their allegiance

Now, here at the climax of this argument that God's redeeming justice and peace are revealed in the announcement that Jesus is the world's *true* Lord—not Caesar, but Jesus—Paul vividly describes the way that God's own Spirit indwells Christians. He likens this indwelling to the indwelling of God in the temple in Jerusalem—and hints at the images of Caesar in his temples. Paul writes that God has given us his Spirit to conform us to the image of his Son. He's called us to be image-bearers and that we ourselves, indwelt by the Spirit, have become ourselves the temple of God. Brothers and Sisters, think on that. As Caesar placed his images around his empire to remind his subjects of his false gospel and his false lordship, and to call the people of the world to give him allegiance, you and I have been filled with God's Spirit so that we will be conformed—so that we will *bear*—the image of his Son. The one, true, and living God has redeemed us in Jesus and has placed us in this world to bear his image: to be witnesses of the true lordship of Jesus to be proclaimers of his gospel, his justice, and his peace, and to announce his royal and sovereign call to allegiance. Brothers and Sisters, we are the people through whom the God of Abraham not only makes it known that he is the one, true, and living God. We are the people through whom he declares that his crucified and risen Son is the world's true Lord. We are the people through whom he announces freedom from the bondage of sin and death and the peace and justice of kingdom.

Let us pray: We are the bearers of your image, Father. As we prayed in the Collect, we ask again that you would keep us in continual godliness. In Jesus, you have forgiven us and washed us clean. Now keep us faithful to our calling to be a holy people. Keep us

faithful to our calling to minister your grace to the world and to proclaim your kingdom and your King. And give us assurance, as we remember your faithfulness and as your Spirit works within us, so that even as we face the opposition of the age that is passing away, we would never cease to labour in prayer for the age to come and the redemption of all things. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.