

Living in the “Not Yet”: The Church of the 21st C Reading: Romans 8:12-25 Prop.11/A
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During the 1st C when slavery, the oppression of women and children, religious persecution, and violence were part and parcel of the Roman culture, St. Paul wrote to the early Christian Church in Rome: “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God... We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves...groan inwardly while we wait for adoption.” (Romans 8)

Groaning is the operative word today. To groan is to express discomfort, anguish, grief, or anger. It is one way to release stress and pain. Yesterday at the gym, I heard men groan as they lifted heavy weights that were far above their abilities. I’ve heard women groan in childbirth, anxious to relieve the pressure of a baby moving through the birth canal. Sometimes our groans reflect disappointed expectations like being put on hold for 30 minutes while trying to coordinate a doctor’s visit. At other times, our groans are deep and sorrowful as when facing the death of a loved one.

Groaning not only occurs on a personal level but extends into the national and international arenas. I think about the suffering going on today in the war-torn country of Yemen, ravaged by the cholera epidemic, the source of which is contaminated drinking water. With few resources and a starvation diet, parents groan as they watch their little ones die, having no access to good medical care. Even Mother Earth joins in the groaning as she experiences the melting of her glaciers and the extinction of many species, 20% of which will be wiped out in 30 years. The way things are today, they contain enough pain and suffering to make one groan inward along with the rest of the world.

In view of the physical, emotional, and spiritual misery that was prevalent in his world some 2000 years ago, Paul speaks of the whole of creation groaning in one loud lament for the kingdom of God to come in its fullness. It was Paul’s belief that there is a large gap between God’s vision for this world and the reality it experiences. No wonder there was a lot of groaning going on. And yet Paul is hopeful that things will change. He places this hope on the Spirit of Christ leading baptized Christians to carve out a world in which compassion, peace, justice, and generosity become the operating principles. He calls these people who are led by the Spirit of God “children of God.” They are the ones who have united their spirit with the Spirit of Christ, creating a force of good that unites all the creatures of the world. He claims that the whole creation is waiting for this to happen. And I believe that at some level, so are we! After all, this is the mission of the church.

“The mission of the church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.” So what does that mean in concrete terms? There are five Marks of Mission that the Episcopal Church has prioritized. They are: 1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom. 2. To teach, baptize, and nurture new believers. 3. To respond to human need by loving service. 4. To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind, and to pursue peace and reconciliation. 5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth. This is the mission of the Church and we are its missionaries: People of God, marked as Christ own forever.

So how did the Christian church morph into a mediocre gathering place where we began to embrace the values of the surrounding culture rather than challenge them? When did the Church begin to define itself as a settled system of beliefs rather than a radical path for transformation? How did the Church go off course in supporting war and overconsumption rather than standing up against the powers of the world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God? Why did the Church become more disturbed about women’s ordination to the priesthood and acceptance of gays into the church than the injustices perpetrated by big money and corrupt government? When did we substitute the mind of Christ for the mind of the University? When did the children of God stop being led by the Spirit and allow their own personal desires to take priority? Perhaps intentionally or unintentionally, we forgot about the Spirit of Christ, a spirit so powerful that its love overcomes all fear.

It is no surprise that the Church in America is losing membership, especially in the mainline denominations. The percentage of people (with no religious affiliation) has risen to over 23% in our country, with the millennial generation surpassing 36%. This generation of “nones” includes our own children and our grandchildren who have little interest in being part of a community of faith. Why do you think that is? Perhaps it is because we have forgotten our mission.

When I think about the early Christian Church, I am struck by how courageous they were. Living in an antagonistic culture where they were often persecuted for their beliefs, many of them continued to be led by the spirit of God in spite of their challenges. Because of their commitment to God in Christ, their minds began to be transformed and this gave them the power to live from a place of love rather than operate from a place of fear. No longer did they do acts of sacrifice because they were supposed to. They reached out with compassion because they were driven by the Spirit of Christ to share themselves freely with others.

There is a lot of commonality between the 1st century Church and the Church of today. And so I think that we can learn from their “best practices” on how to be the Church in the 21st century. I think back to those early Christians in Rome who stayed behind to care for the sick. During the times when an epidemic would hit the entire city, those who had resources would flee to the hills. However, the Christians stayed behind and risked their lives to care for the sick. When their neighbors saw this, they were touched by these gestures of compassion and remarked: “See how the Christians love one another. See how the Christians reach out in love.” This is what grew the church, not programs.

In 1878, yellow fever invaded the city of Memphis for the third time in ten years. 30,000 citizens had fled in terror while 20,000 more remained to face the plague. When the worst was over, more than 5000 people had died, including many of the Anglican Sisters of St. Mary’s. These brave women of God remained in the city to give relief to the sick, comfort to the dying, and homes to the orphans. “See how the Christians love one another. See how the Christians reach out in love!”

The early Christians did not have church buildings. Instead, several families and individuals would gather together in a home each Sunday to have a meal, to break bread together, to pray, to read the Scriptures, to sing psalms, to hear the good news, and to support one another in their lives in Christ. And then during the week, they would roll up their sleeves and put their faith into action by feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and helping the marginalized. Instead of waiting for people to come to them, they went out into their neighborhoods and villages to meet people where they were. Christianity began to flourish not because of its buildings but because of the compassion that the baptized community showed toward those who were suffering. “See how the Christians love one another. See how the Christians reach out in love!”

Next month, Trinity Church will begin a new chapter of its life. I am pleased that Father Craig will lead you through the interim period. During this time, you will have to decide what kind of Church you want to be in the 21st century. There will be a temptation to put your trust into more programs, the perfect preacher, younger families, or modern music. There will be a lot of energy focused on getting the right rector. But if your efforts are not focused on orienting yourself to God’s grace first and foremost, then your efforts will be in vain. In summary, all you need is love. Love is what attracts people to a congregation, and the Spirit of Christ pulsating through its people is what will keep them there. The future of mature Christianity will be practice-based, not belief based. And that practice is all about loving service.

Like the Church in Rome, we Americans have been born into a culture where many of its values are inconsistent with the gospel’s. We live in a society that supports competition over cooperation. We have gotten sucked into a materialistic world, craving for what is bigger, better, faster and more rather than being satisfied with a simplicity of life, sharing our abundance with those who have little. Our politics tells us that there isn’t enough to go around and that we must be frugal with our wealth. There never seems to be enough money for health care, education, and basic infrastructure, yet like the Roman Empire, there always seems to be enough money for war.

From the beginning of Christianity to our present time, there has always been a struggle between the ways of the world and the ways of the gospel. No wonder the whole creation continues to groan. How are we Christians to engage and relate to the surrounding culture? How are we to live? Should we uncritically embrace our cultural as a good thing and let Wall Street determine our future? Or should we seek to transform our hearts and the culture around us? Where does our loyalty to our country end and our allegiance to Christ begin? These are the questions that need to be answered both personally and collectively as the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God at Trinity Episcopal Church in Sutter Creek. May God be with you in your efforts to be led by the Spirit of Christ.