

“The ‘We-ness’ of it All ...”

Romans 8:26-39

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When we arrive at the point of “Joys & Concerns” each week during our Wednesday Morning Prayer service in Buchanan Chapel, often the pastor introduces the concerns in this manner:

According to today’s report from the City of Chicago, *last week*, there were:

- 12 murders
 - 40 criminal sexual assaults
 - 235 robberies
 - 154 cases of aggravated battery
 - 143 burglaries
 - 508 thefts
 - 612 cases of motor vehicle theft
- making a total of 1,704 incidents, not including the additional 71 shooting incidents. And we’re barely into the second quarter of the year ...*

She then hands a small piece of paper (on which these statistics have been handwritten) to the worship leader and urges us to pray that God will use us to help find some solution to the terrible violence that grips our city and cities, towns, countrysides, and places everywhere.

Her consistent witness amplifies this truth that we experience in so many different ways: we live in an *alienated* world.

Add to that our rising awareness of the increase in and negative effects of *isolation*, and our sense of alienation is compounded. In her recent article critiquing the “self-love” phenomenon as magnifying the condition of loneliness, journalist Maytal Eyal cites a 2021 study commissioned by Cigna that found that nearly 80% of adults from the ages of 18 to 24 reported feeling lonely. The study itself also reports that adults with physical health issues are approximately 50% more likely to be lonely than those with strong physical health.

My perspective on this is that our society places outsized emphases on escapism and individualism (be it through the “self-love/care” movement, the renewed popularity of stoicism, or other trends), which breeds further alienation and isolation that fuels cycles of violence and dis-ease, Eyal writes,

Today, we live in a climate where needing help can evoke shame and embarrassment, where cut-throat competition takes precedence over compassionate collaboration, and where self-sufficiency is celebrated as the ultimate

achievement. To navigate the harsh terrain of radical individualism, self-love has emerged as our tool for survival. But it can come at a cost, especially when the type of self-love we turn to is the kind that has been manipulated by corporate ad campaigns and social media. In its commodified form, self-love is not really self-love at all; instead, it's more like self-sabotage, convincing us to hyperfocus on ourselves at the expense of connecting with others.

There will never be enough spa treatments, microbrewery tours, or sleep-ins to fix what is broken within and among us.

To be fair, I'm not advocating for opposite extremes. For example, I agree with Eytal in acknowledging that, "Self-love is a powerful tool; it can be used for good or bad, for connection or disconnection," and that an indication of its healthy practice is "when we feel connected to our bodies and our communities." On the renewed interest in stoicism, it must be said that the essence of what the ancients, and what many practitioners today appreciate about the philosophy, is that its emphasis on self-mastery and "conquering our limits" is meant to contribute to the well-being of society at large through our careful discernment of what is within and outside of our control. And, on the significance of the individual in relationship with the whole, I treasure the verse of 13th-century Sufi poet Rumi: "You are not a drop in the ocean / you are the ocean in one drop."

Rather, what I find corrective within Paul's word to the Romans is his determination to inspire, equip, and connect a community of believers who, even in the experience of their own suffering and persecution, are joined *together* in their weakness by the all-encompassing power of God who names, claims, and sustains them.

I've recently been invited to explore what might be resources for finding love and connection in an alienated world, so I am pleased that this passage appears in our lectionary today to serve as a beacon.

Paul's pen, in making his case to the community of believers in Rome that the presence of Gentiles among Jewish followers of Jesus *demonstrates* rather than *dilutes* God's redemptive plan, ultimately makes the case that *Christ's love in us, Christ's love with us, Christ's love through us, come what may, is antidote to alienation and isolation.*

For Paul, divine power resides in the act of Jesus taking on the cross—the paradox of the manifestation of God as a body that suffers and dies—so that, even as we experience suffering in this life, awash in our weakness and vulnerabilities, we are met with the loving presence of our God who knows what it is to suffer. Our weakness is not a barrier *to* God, but a point of encounter *with* God.

The "we-ness" of it all, so to speak, is important: Paul grounds his words in *community*, even as so many contemporary Christians champion his message as if it were part of some sort of individualistic self-help plan of salvation. It's the *we* that matters, especially if we are indeed desperate to structure our lives in contrast to the burdens of alienation and isolation rooted in hyper-individualism that dominates our

society and worldview. And it's the *we-ness* of it all that the church, in this day and age, is uniquely positioned to amplify and celebrate, even as it so often struggles to envision and achieve this aim. We, as the church, can choose to stem the tides of alienation and isolation, and confess and repent, mindful of all the ways the church has functioned as a *source* of these ills—buying into the myths of rugged individualism, of the quest for “power-over” instead of “power-with.” God calls us to be a model of healthy “we-ness” in the world.

Not *every* institution in society is currently struggling to convincingly communicate an inclusive “we.” If you’ve ventured out to the cinema recently, you’ve likely been greeted by the likes of Academy Award-winning actress Nicole Kidman, striding across the screen in a gray Michael Kors suit with bedazzled pinstripes, to declare:

We come to this place ... for magic.
 We come to AMC theaters to laugh, to cry, to care.
 Because we need that, all of us,
 that indescribable feeling we get when the lights begin to dim.
 And we go somewhere we’ve never been before;
 not just entertained, but somehow reborn.
 Together.

Dazzling images, on a huge silver screen.
 Sound that I can feel.
 Somehow, heartbreak feels good in a place like this.
 Our heroes feel like the best part of us, and stories feel perfect and powerful.
 Because here, they are.

“Somehow, heartbreak feels good in a place like this ...” Might Paul have resonated with this sentiment to describe the aspirations of a believing community? As we think about the church today, we ought to feel that our individual stories and experiences of heartbreak, weakness, and vulnerability would be at least as compelling to us as a sort of “connective tissue” as what we could expect from the endeavors of corporate shareholders churning out vehicles of entertainment, yes?

Too often, for many, that experience is “no.” Too often, we have regarded and/or experienced church, and/or Christian community, as the place of pretense and stagnation; a place where the most challenging truths of our individual stories find no company in the presence of others; where we will not be expected to have our presence bear any significance to a *whole* that is *wholly*—and *holy*—unique to the substance of its parts; where we feel required to wear a happy face and pretend that all is well within us in order to conform—as if conformity were the only stake involved in being truly Christian. Church should *not* be the place where we deny the existence of suffering, especially when the movie theater, of all places, doesn’t require this of us.

Paul meant for the Romans, and ultimately for us, to encounter God’s awe-inducing power searching our hearts, cradling the Holy Spirit within us, stirring

up what God intends to inspire within us to enliven us to live into God's purposes for us in—and beyond—the world. Paul invites all, even today, to recognize our kinship with Christ as the firstborn among us as family—a family of *belonging*. To *feel*, within the marrow of our bones, that “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord,” and that, in its wake, we are bound to one another.

While I emphasize the importance of valuing community over individualism as essential to overcoming isolation and alienation, I also value the importance of individual experience as a part of what shapes community. As Kidman reminds us, “our heroes feel like the best part of us,” and so, if we're asked to consider *Paul* as one of our heroes (by virtue of the fact that we're hearing his words today), then we ought to reflect on aspects of his story that influence his message.

The mere notion for some, however, of Paul as a heroic figure is challenging. I mean, have you *read* Paul? In portions of his own writing and even in some literature about him, Paul comes across as strident, arrogant, presumptuous, “man-splainy,” and “apostle-splainy” (to tediously coin a term). The fact alone that Paul, formerly Saul, was *not* among the Twelve Apostles yet audaciously argued against crucial elements of Peter's gospel (yes, “that” Peter, whom Jesus dubbed “the rock” among his disciples) speaks to this unease. Some even argue that Paul's past as an entitled religious authority might've carried over post-conversion.

I think back to a conversation on Paul nearly two decades ago among my clergy covenant group, in which many of us grumbled about preparing to teach copious amounts of Paul to adult Sunday school classes. One among us cheerfully shouted, “ohhhh, no, I *love* Paul! See, if you read Paul as a *mystic* ...”

Before Paul was “Paul,” Paul was “Saul.” As a Pharisee, a religious authority in Judea, Saul was infamous for his active pursuit and persecution of Jesus's followers. The Book of Acts even links him to the stoning of Stephen, a deacon in the early church in Jerusalem. Saul was well-versed in Mosaic law and enforced rigid separation between Jews and Gentiles to preserve purity requirements. That is, before Saul was struck suddenly by a power that, as the benediction says, could do “infinitely more than he could ask or imagine.” One day, en route to Damascus in search of more Jesus-followers to “ravage the church” (see Acts 8:3), Saul and his traveling companions were met with a blinding light—startling him enough to knock him to the ground. Amid the spectacle of light came the presence of the resurrected Christ, crying out, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” The voice instructed Saul to be led to Damascus where he would receive further instruction. After three days of blindness while sheltered there, Saul's sight was restored by a disciple named Ananias. Saul experienced conversion and was baptized. Now filled with zeal to proclaim the good news, Saul partnered with other disciples to advance what had been known as “the Way,” and his name eventually changed from Saul to Paul. Con-

victed by the Holy Spirit to expand the gospel among the gentiles, Paul would conduct three missionary journeys throughout the Roman Empire, establishing house churches throughout. He would endure imprisonment, shipwreck, starvation, and subterfuge along the way.

It was nothing so ordinary as “movie magic” that transformed Paul, but the mighty power of God to turn him upside-down, inside-out. To consider Paul’s stubbornly audacious tone exhibited in much of his writing is to also appreciate his miraculous and mystical encounter with the triune God—Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. His experience of God’s mystical realm became the way he understood himself and the world. It ignited his passion. It shaped his story. It assured him that a heart broken is *not* a heart lost.

New Testament scholar Michael Gorman describes the function of such story as “narrative spirituality,” by which he means “a spirituality that tells a story, a dynamic life with God that corresponds in some way to the divine ‘story’.” From this understanding comes the primary concept that Gorman introduces to the field of the study of Paul: *cruciformity*. Simply stated, “cruciformity is, in sum, what Paul is all about, and what the communities of the Messiah that he founded and/or nurtured were also all about ... the experience by which the church—at least according to Paul—stands or falls.” To elaborate, Gorman defines cruciformity as “the all-encompassing, integrating narrative reality of Paul’s life and thought, expressed and experienced in every dimension of his being, bringing together the diverse and potentially divergent aspects of that existence.”

At this point, I’ll borrow Paul’s words to ask, “So what are we to say about these things?” What’s the point? For one thing, it is to say that to be beloved community in Christ is *not* to deny, diminish, or ignore the realities of suffering. To pretend that we are neither subject to, nor complicit in, the existence of suffering, is to deny the presence of God in our healing and in our call to repentance. For Christ in his experience as a body in the world on a divine mission of teaching, healing, feeding, and commissioning his followers, there was “no way out but through,” even to the cross. Saul as oppressor wielded the violence of the lash; Paul as apostle knew both its sinfulness and its limits. Christ’s grip on his life is where the lash was impotent and the power of God omnipotent. To this end, it is *not* that suffering is to be understood as divine, it *is* to say that, even in the midst of suffering, it is the life-giving presence of God, bathing us in love.

Paul rejoiced that *we*, yes *we*, are “more than conquerors through him who loved us,” with an exuberance that gives us permission today to end our addiction to relying on our individual, herculean efforts to soothe the complex pain of being human in this dehumanizing world.

So, *together*, let us, with courage and hope, acknowledge our weaknesses, both individually and collectively. Let us be built into communities both transformed and transformational, through the power of Christ that mends us and re-members us. Let

us as the church hold space for the lonely, the forgotten, and the neglected, for, in so doing, we more than likely hold space for ourselves.

Christ's love in us, Christ's love with us, Christ's love through us—come what may. Amen.

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