

Message: “Love Makes Life Better”

Are you familiar with rugs and tapestries? How about needlepoint? When a person crafting works on a piece, they usually have a design on the front but often end up doing a lot of work on the back.

What do you see when you look at the back of a tapestry or needlepoint craft? It's not pretty. You see knots, perhaps snarls or a tangle or two.

It's not a beautiful picture. But, on the front, it is. Paul said, *“We know God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to the Lord's purpose.”*

Yet when trials or sorrows come, we often ask “Why?”

In those times, life seems so messed up and unfair. All we see are tangles and snarls.

God has a different point of view. God sees the beautiful, finished life we can't yet see. God comforts us as persons within a community of faith during times of trial, hardship, burden and sorrow.

But God's tapestry isn't just focused on us. Each of us has a place in the beauty and coherence of the whole. This was God's plan all along. God's intent is to save all of creation, which means all people, too. It's the grandest of visions and goals. Don't worry, God won't lose sight of your life, your contribution to the weave.

This chapter in Paul's letter is inspiring and shocking.

There are a lot of mysteries which Paul alludes to but doesn't resolve. Have you noticed this is generally true of our understanding of God?

I once heard an illustration: There's a chasm between us and God. People have recorded their experiences of God. This shows us bridges God is building to reach us. But we only understand in part, so the bridge is incomplete. And humanity reaches out to God, seeking to build bridges. But they are also incomplete. The chasm remains.

And so, we live in a tension between faith and knowledge.

We want to know how to bridge the gap, but we don't. This is why Paul, Martin Luther, John Wesley and so many faith leaders speak about grace and faith. They know our thirst for understanding is unslaked. We find purpose, meaning and contentment through faith alone.

The illustration also helps us better understand how we see our relationship with God. Some see God as the builder. They believe our duty is to wait for God to reach us with the bridge, then we can cross. Some see God helping us build a bridge. God supports us and both sides work together until they meet, then we cross the bridge together.

No matter how we see it, God has a plan and purpose. And God takes the time to make sure it's done right. Peter understood this. He said, *"The Lord isn't slow to keep his promise, as some think of slowness, but he is patient toward you, not wanting anyone to perish but all to change their hearts and lives"* (2 Peter 3:9).

Whether it's bridge-building, rug making or needlepointing, the love and care of the crafter make all the difference. Patience is needed. God is patient. We can be, too. When we look for God's presence in the moment, we find peace. We find grace. And, together, we find love.

This leads me to our proclivity to misunderstand and misinterpret Paul's writing. For example, some read it and believe it's only about them. Salvation is personal, focused only on individuals. I think this stems from our human views on control and dominance. This only generates snarls and tangles.

When we shift to a loving view, caring for our neighbors in the same way God cares for us, a different picture emerges. Remember Peter's words, *"The Lord... wants all to change their hearts and lives."*

And Paul's words affirm Peter, *"I'm convinced nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other created thing"* (Romans 8:38-39).

We can lose sight of this, thinking it's better to be self-sufficient. We can adopt a Stoic attitude and try to conquer life by enduring it without complaint or response. But suffering in silence isn't what redemption and salvation is about.

Paul says we are more. We aren't here to conquer people by faith. We're the opposite. We're redeemed through a gift from our Savior. It isn't about power. We're assured God has enough love for all of us.

It's about living through suffering together with love and faith.

This brings us closer to God.

When we live through struggles as a church family, our lives together are made better, corporately and personally. This is why Paul says, *“the Spirit helps us in our weakness”* (8:26a).

From the beginning, Paul argues we must understand the nature of community to participate fully in grace. To hear the Spirit's sighs, to see the good being worked even in desperate circumstances, to be more, we must grasp our commonality. A relationship with God has never been an individual exercise.

Yes, the individual is important. Individual choices and decisions need to be made. A personal relationship with Jesus can shape an individual's life and discipleship. But all too often, we focus on the person's walk with Christ while ignoring their participation in the community of faith. We've neglected to emphasize the call to faith is a call to relationship with God and with the family of Christ.

This isn't about benefits or extras we get. It's about the essence of following Christ. Faith, at its core, is a shared experience. This is a fundamental part of being in relationship.

Like most pastors, I've heard the question, “Do I need to be a part of the church to follow Jesus?” You may have as well. Being familiar with the early desert fathers and mothers, maybe we'd answer, “No, not necessarily, but it's very important.” Yet even those so-called hermits engaged with pilgrims and disciples who came and learned from them.

Paul's answer? Yes, to be a Christian, you need a community around you. You need a sense of belonging, a way to live out your passion day by day. You (the plural you) need a God to worship and a neighbor to show kindness to. And you need the support of a caring community who will lift you up when your step slows or stumbles.

This is how love makes life better. When we care for one another, we become the most supported, most connected, most loved, even in our suffering, even in our weakness. Together, we are part of something bigger than ourselves. We are God's family, filled with God's love. Thanks be to God.

If you hear this message and Jesus touches your heart, I invite you to come and speak with me. God is calling you. And I invite you to join our congregation. Even if you live a distance away, you can be part of the life of our church. We have members who do so, and today's technology allows marvelous things to happen. We invite you to be part of our church family.

Let us pray ...

Romans 8:26-28, 37-39 (CEB)

In the same way, the Spirit comes to help our weakness. We don't know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans. The one who searches hearts knows how the Spirit thinks, because he pleads for the saints, consistent with God's will. We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose.

But in all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us. I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.