

“Conflict and Shalom” text Romans 8:18-28 (short Rom. 8:22-23)

10/28/18 Hope Lutheran Brethren. 9 am service (part of this is OCR from a scanned draft I had printed out before the file didn't save on my computer, so the formatting isn't all fixed)

INTRO. Thank you for the opportunity to be here with you again.

I currently wear a couple of hats with InterVarsity. I work some at Lawrence University, but have recently transitioned to working more with IV nationally in the Native Ministries Department. One of my hats there is contextualizing evangelism materials for Native students. Our text in Romans today is one I've been studying to help inform our approach to evangelism on campus.

IL. I have a friend who became a Christian in college through the witness of another student. After hearing of the wonderful blessings that Jesus provides, she was invited to follow Jesus. Of course! All she had to do was sort of join up with his team. It was like falling off a log – easy! The Christian sharing with her even implied that she would be doing Jesus a favor by joining up – Jesus would be delighted to have her support.

You are thinking that this probably isn't the best way of sharing the gospel, right?

I must say that some of the worst gospel presentations I ever heard were during the days when revival was breaking out on one of the campuses I was staffing. Apparently, God is more interested in faithfulness than a perfect presentation. It worked that way for my friend – she is still following Jesus. But she understands now that there is more depth to it – a depth that is difficult as well as rewarding.

The book of Romans, as much as any in the NT, paints a glorious picture of blessing in Christ. In Christ we have deliverance and therefore (ch.8) no condemnation. We have a new identity as adopted heirs and ultimately glory... but ... there is suffering along the way. Here, in ch. 8, is a troubling aside. Verse 17 ... provided we suffer with him...

What's with that? I'd like to try to encapsulate it with a couple of prepositions. Here's the part to write down if note-taking helps you: everything we receive *through* Christ requires that we be *with* Christ.

Being *with* Christ involves living in a kind of tension or battle of longings. Paul calls it “waging war” in ch. 7 (v23). It is important to get a clear view of this battlefield, and Romans 8 helps us. Christ bids us *live in the tension*, or, put another way, *live on the battlefield*. How? The key word that tips us off in this passage is “groaning,” so I would like you to focus in on places that groaning appears in the passage.

[READ]Romans 8:18-28 “ For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation awaits

with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. 23 And not only the creation, but, we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. 26 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. 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. 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.

Did you pick up on “groaning” in the passage? Paul says there are three things that groan. The first is all of creation. Secondly, starting in v. 23, is us -- Christians. Finally, the Holy Spirit groans.

I'd like to talk about these out of order. Let's start with us, the inward groans that we experience in 8:23.

I. The Tension is Within Us -- We Groan

A. Paul actually brought this up a bit earlier, in ch. 7, so let's see how he describes it.

B. [READ Rom 7:15 ff] “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. So I find it to be a law [or principle] that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. “

C. A way that is helpful for me to understand this struggle is by using the word “desire.” Before I began following Jesus in college, I knew the right answers about God and even Jesus (my mom took me to church). But I didn't want him. Like the soil that had a lot of weeds in Jesus's parable, there were other things I

wanted more. I wanted to solve my own problems. I wanted to succeed on my terms. But God kept pursuing me. Some guys at college kept trying to include me in the campus Christian group that seemed to have the kind of relationships that I wanted most deeply. In fact, when I think about any step of spiritual progress throughout my life, it is because God first put a spark of longing inside of me.

D. We can all relate in some way to what Paul says about wanting God, he says [v. 18 8t 21] "...I have the desire to do what is right...I delight in the ways of God in my inner being..."

E. How about you? Think of some things about God that you deeply want. What spark of longing has he put in you? Maybe it's

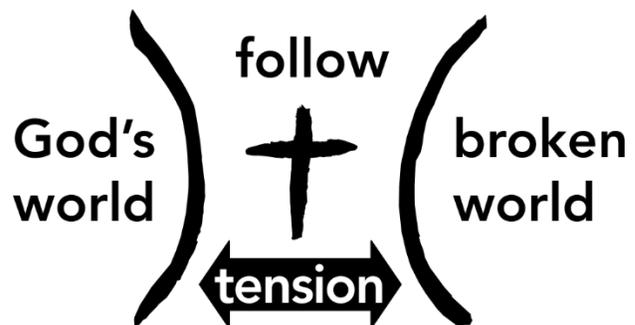
1. maybe it is genuine love and honor
2. maybe it is the joyful rest that comes with His peace and harmony
3. maybe you just want to matter in life, you have a longing for significance
4. if we were in a campus Small Group this would be a good time to turn to your neighbor and share, but I won't make you do that. Think about something about God and His ways that you want or long for.

F. Now let's talk about the other side. Paul is very vulnerable here. He admits to a battle going on inside of him. he admits to being torn. He says part of him just keeps doing wrong. What is going on here? Are we all schizophrenic? We desire God, but we still sin. I think there is a pretty simple explanation of why we sin. We want to. We sin because we want to.

G. We have conflicting desires. It is not rocket science. When we do right, our desire for the good wins. As simple as it is, it is still very confusing to live in it.

SEE ILLUSTRATION 2W

1. [STAGE RIGHT]. Over here on this side is God's world. Any good thing we long for is a reflection of God and His world. We may not even realize it is connected to God. but if it is true and good. then of course it is. Paul says to set our desires on this, to set our minds on this. is to set them on "...life and peace." [8:6]. This is in fact my favorite way to talk about God's world in the scriptures -- peace. The peace Paul is_ alluding to here isn't mere lack of conflict (the way we often use "peace" as "not war"). It is Shalom - a huge concept in the OT. Shalom is peace, harmony and flourishing of goodness. It is the fullness of what God intends for his creation. When Jesus was talking about Shalom ideas from the OT, he often used the term "kingdom of God" to help people understand it.



2. [STAGE LEFT] Now on this side is the world as we find it - a broken and sinful world. Humanity has vandalized the Shalom of creation. There are broken people. broken institutions, philosophies. etc. We participate in it all, we perpetuate it, and we are also

victims of it. There is a lot of pain here, and struggles. It is a world that has rejected God's shalom, has rejected his leadership and provision -- a world that would rather do it without God, or make up its own gods. You get the picture.

3. Now, the really interesting part is what happens in the middle, between these two worlds. This is the battleground. It is here we see the spiritual dimension of humanity. It is here we can truly suffer. There is plenty of pain over here (LEFT), but there is something that makes any pain much worse -- that is to realize that the pain is not the way it's supposed to be. We suffer spiritually when our longings for the better world show us the pain is wrong. What happens in the middle here? We long for God's world while we are stuck in the broken world. Here is where we have those conflicting desires. When Paul is here in ch. 7 he says "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me...?"

J. [ILLUST. COLLEGE GIRL IN LOVE TRIANGLE] I think a good way to illustrate this state of conflicting desires is a situation I have seen many times over the years on campus - a love triangle. A young lady might, for example, say "I'm not sure if I love him, or him. I'm just so confused about everything right now. It's ripping me apart. It's so complicated." It's not really that complicated from an outsider's perspective, is it? She has conflicting desires, that's all. She is drawn to one young man but perhaps still cares for or feels obligated to another. She knows she can't have it both ways. She can only give her heart to one guy.

K. Why does it feel confusing? Because I can't be sure who I am when my desires are in conflict -- my desires are largely the things that define me and give my life shape. When these conflict, I'm stuck at a crossroads between two lives, two destinies -- rather like two different people.

L. ILLUST. DRUG ADDICTION is the most striking example I have seen of this. We had a foster daughter for a year or so who who struggled with methamphetamine addiction. It was like she was two different people. When her desire to stay sober was winning, she was sweet and hard working. When her desire for meth overcame her, she would throw it all away for the next high -- she became manipulative, secretive, and obsessive.

M. Let's return to v. 23 of chapter 8. Paul returns to this idea of conflicting desires. He is talking about Christians, those who have tasted the life and shalom of God. He says we have the firstfruits of the Spirit. Firstfruits is a sacrifice at the beginning of the harvest time. it is a time of thanksgiving to God because the harvest has begun, but it isn't in the barn yet, so to speak. He also uses the metaphors of adoption and redemption. It's like we have the court order, but the adoption hasn't been finalized. Or we have the coupon, but we haven't redeemed it yet.

N. Paul here uses the words "grown inwardly" to express the tension we feel on this battleground.

O. What we need: hope and patience.

1. Hope has a future orientation. It has not been "seen" or realized yet. Paul reminds us that when we became Christians, this is what we signed on for. When we first knew Jesus coming alongside us, it was wonderful, but we knew that we had to finish the race of this present life. Just because Jesus is alongside of us doesn't mean we have left the battlefield. We have not left that point of tension, and there are times we are going to feel it especially keenly. We still need to rely on him, in fact, that is just what he is teaching us to do.

2. There are plenty of ways we can react badly when the tension hits us in a new way or when it seems to be wearing us down

a) we can take it out on others (2 other times "groan" appears [Heb. 13:17, James 5:9] the warning is to avoid groaning against others)

b) we can react with shock "this is a weird thing that shouldn't be happening to me" and try to ignore it, medicate it, or try to make it go away in another way -- that is, we can try to deal with it as if it isn't spiritually important

c) we can rationalize it. A friend told me about an elder in her old church who claimed he had a pass on a particular sin, calling it his "besetting sin" He would then indulge himself at great cost to his wife.

d) we can take it with discouragement -- feeling perhaps that this is confirmation that we are a hopeless case

3. It is at these times, when we are tempted in these ways, that we most need to pray for hope and patience -- these are normal battlefield temptations.

P. [TRANS] There is another reason we know that this groaning is part of life on the battlefield: it is much bigger than just us -- all of Creation groans, too. Paul's analysis goes much deeper than just our personal experience.

II. The Tension is All Around Us in Creation -- Creation Groans

A. I skipped this one at first because I think it might be harder for us to see in some ways.

B. Remember the discussion of shalom a few minutes ago? For many people in Bible times, broken shalom was most easily seen in the broken rhythms or harmonies of creation. The rain wouldn't come when it should, enemies might destroy the crops or pollute lands with salt or the bodies of slain Israelites, natural disasters would disrupt life. Passages of judgment in the OT often include many of these sorts of natural

disasters that God would bring about. Think about how God disrupted the rhythms of nature when bringing judgement on Egypt before the Exodus.

- C. v. 20 says “the creation was subject to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it...” Who subjected creation to this? God, ultimately. It goes all the way back to the garden where God cursed the ground as a consequence of sin. God didn’t want to do this, but it was a necessary move to bring about our salvation. It is a direct sign and consequence of our broken relationship with Him, since it is through his provision to us in creation that our harmony with Him is expressed.
- D. We should never lose sight of this monumental tragedy. God had to mar his great and beautiful masterpiece – creation – in order to bring about our salvation. Creation itself is a casualty on this battlefield [MIDDLE POSITION]. Creation itself groans, longing for restoration to the way things are supposed to be. Paul holds up the groaning of creation – something which should be evident to us – as a way to help us understand our state spiritually. It helps us to understand what it means to be caught between these two worlds, in the middle at the point of tension or groaning.
- E. I fear that we, in our age of technology and physical comfort, can’t hear the language of creation very well. Like my tribe’s language, which we have all but lost – it is very hard to recapture. The language of creation is not our heart language. We didn’t grow up hearing it. Some of you are probably farmers or gardeners. My guess is that you have a greater understanding of this mystery – perhaps a greater intuition of how the harmonies of nature reflect God. It is an understanding that I think we should all seek.

IL: a couple weeks ago I took some students up to the Menominee reservation for an event at their tribal college. I had an opportunity to talk to a Native professor about forest health. It came up for me because I’m gathering materials to make a bark canoe, and many of the larger birch trees I’ve found have parasite infection that wrecks the bark. Their birch trees are fine. I asked him about emerald ash bore. Ash trees are dying all around the reservation, but their ash trees are fine. “Why?” I asked him. The forest is healthy, he said. The soil is healthy, and variety of animals and plants are healthy, and they all work together to keep the forest harmonious and strong, like a body resistant to invasive disease. The

Menominee people have a long tradition of protecting their forest and keeping things in balance.

F. This is a big deal to God. I think many of us find it hard to understand why scripture refers to creation as a person in this passage. Working in Native ministry, actually, has helped me quite a lot in understanding this. Native peoples often don't have any problem referring to Creation as a person, as in "mother nature." It is not a matter of idolatry, because most of these same tribes also believe in a creator, one God. Tribal people, like those in the OT, feel a strong connection to the land. It is a special relationship, and living well with Creation is a way to honor the Creator and live in harmony with how the Creator wants to provide for us. It is a sacred responsibility to care for God's creation. Thinking of creation as a person might help us see why we should never look at it as a mere "thing" to use or abuse as suits our whims.

G. Some of you might be thinking I'm sounding a bit like an environmentalist wacko. That's how my brother-in-law would put it, I think. I don't want to derail the sermon on this point, but I do think we should pay attention to our scriptures. "Mother Nature" is a Christian idea – we shouldn't let anyone hijack it. That's the image Paul uses in v. 22. Creation is a mother in the pains of childbirth. God wants better things for his creation than what we humans have done to it. As we understand this more deeply it will become another element of hope for us to help us on this present battleground.

[TRANS] there is a final reason we know that this groaning is part of life on the battlefield.

III. The Tension is Within God Himself – God Groans

A. This is the hardest one for me in some ways. The infinitely powerful Trinity groans? But I think this is actually the key to the whole passage. it is the most encouraging thing of all, because when God calls us to the battlefield, he feels for us, he understands us, he is helping us and most importantly, He is calling us to engage the very same way He is engaging.

B. First, v26. God knows that living in the tension is hard for us. He knows we are confused when some of our longings draw us to God, but sin still dogs us. But even when it is too deep for our words, when it is beyond our understanding, the Spirit knows what is going on and what to do. Maybe we are just aware of the suffering, but can't see why. The Spirit is on it.

C. Interceding is a coming between. Really, God doing this shouldn't surprise us. That's what Jesus did all the time. Think of all the risks Jesus took. Jesus left his throne above to join us at our point of tension. When we were suffering, longing for God but bound to sin, he came into our world, he came alongside of us. It cost him all the time. Even healings of Jesus that seem routine, like the time he healed someone's hearing in Mark - 7:34. The passage says Jesus groaned, using the same word as in this passage. Jesus was engaged in the same battle that he wants to lead us in. This is, I think, actually one of the best ways to describe what it means to live a Christian life. A Christian does what Jesus does. Jesus steps onto the battlefield alongside of people who are torn between two worlds, and we should do the same. By his power, we can help. This is God's plan to restore shalom. This is the kingdom. This is the Jesus Way.

IV. Conclusion

A. God wants us to live in the tension, even to wage war there.

1. Living the Christian life is not about pretending we live in heaven on earth or creating an insulated heaven on earth that lives in denial of it. (RIGHT SIDE) ‘
2. It is certainly not in striking a compromise with a broken and sinful world, settling for it, or giving up on anything better and losing hope. (LEFT)
3. No, where we want to live in this life is in between. Why? For the simple reason that that is where Jesus is. That is where he met us when we first turned to him. That is where he shows up for us when we need him now. That is where his Holy Spirit intercedes for us. And, as we seek to be like our Lord, that is where we need to be for the sake of others that He loves and for His creation that he loves.
4. The glory of Christ, the blessing of God, pours through that place, that in-between place of tension. That's where the cross of Christ is, as well as those smaller crosses we take up in his name. This is the place of suffering, that messy, confusing, not-sure-what-to-do place where we feel like we can't go on but can't give up on hope either.
5. If there is ever going to be clarity — if we are ever going to have revelation from God - here is where we will see it. Remember what Paul said at the beginning of our passage? (v18) "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." If we are going to experience freedom and forgiveness and power it is going to be here. That is the all-things-work-together-for-good place. To experience the glory that comes through Christ, we have to with Christ on the battlefield.

B. Paul goes on to say in the next passage that this is God's calling. This is his plan, because he loves us. It is one of the most encouraging passages in all of the scriptures, where he concludes that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

C. I'll conclude with telling you about one of my sons. He takes life really hard sometimes. He works hard - reads his Bible, prays, takes risks for Jesus. But he is easily disappointed in himself. He is keenly aware of his temptations and shortcomings. He knows about the students that he was able bring to his Bible study for example. but he feels for those that he didn't reach out to. He knows he took some risks, but he also knows he passed some up because he was feeling lazy or anxious. In fact, it seems the more he attempts for Jesus the more he notices his shortcomings. And he gets discouraged about himself. Can you hear his groaning? He is right here in Romans, isn't he? We were having one of those moments the other day sitting at the table together. He was stuck in discouragement, confused and doubting himself. At times like that he can't see the good things God is doing in his life like I can. I can't argue him out of it with a "it's not so bad" line. He knows better. It is bad. So I agree with him. "You're right son, you could do better. You know that. God knows that. But winning is God's job. Your job is just to stay in the battle. That's what He wants. Have you ever stopped to think about why in the world you keep doing this to yourself? Why in the world you keep taking risks for Jesus even though it is hard'? Right there you have evidence that God is working in your life. Keep putting yourself in the battle, keep asking Him for what you need. Ask him for encouragement if that's what you need. Ask Him for help to keep asking if that's what you need. Noticing you are in a battle is not failure -- being in the battle is actually a sign of success. Because that's where Jesus is, right alongside of us.

Let's Pray. Father, conform us to the image of your Son on this battlefield. Help us by your Spirit when we seek you but so easily get discouraged and confused. In the name of your son we pray. Amen.