

Romans 8:26-39

Preached for Stone Church of Willow Glen via Zoom by Rev. Dr. Aimee Moiso

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Together for Good

I've been working part time at a church in Nashville for the past several months, and as you might imagine much of our conversation as a staff has been about the pandemic, if and when we might reopen the building, and under what conditions. Our church also houses a preschool, so we've been following the local school district deliberations. There are a lot of private schools in Nashville, and they make their own decisions about reopening. Currently, school will start August 4, but will be online through Labor Day at least.

I've also been talking to my brother about his school's plans. He's a middle school teacher in Idaho. His district still hasn't made a decision, but they've been polling to see what parents want. Of course, the parents are totally divided over everything from virtual learning to mask wearing. The first day of school is supposed to be August 18.

The other day, I saw this going around on Facebook from an 8th grade teacher in Minneapolis:

Going back to school buildings in fall is a bad idea.
Doing distance learning in fall is a bad idea.
Some combination of the two is a bad idea.
I do not have any better ideas.

I hate global pandemics.

When it comes to figuring out what to do with students and schools for the fall semester 2020 in the United States of America, there really are no good solutions. Certainly there are safer and less safe options, cheaper and more expensive options. There are "do the best you can for as many as you can" options, there are "first come, first served" options, there are "prioritize those most at risk and most in need" options. But even the best options are still not very good.

It is not because teachers and administrators are not trying. It is not because schools and parents have given up. It is not because we do not have the creativity or fortitude or will to try to make the best of a bad situation. It is because the situation

is *just that bad*. There really aren't good options, and kids and teachers and staff and their families will suffer as a result.

Sometimes there really are no good options. Things are just that bad. Right now feels like one of those times.

In the middle of today's text from Romans, Paul writes: *We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, those who are called according to God's purpose. They are predestined and called and justified and glorified.*

There now, don't we all feel better? Paul tells us things work together for good if we love God, and everything is predestined for those who are called. That settles it. Right?

Somehow during a global pandemic these verses do not feel reassuring to me. If anything, they feel *uncomfortable*, maybe even like a trap. Paul's words might mean, on one hand, that things aren't going well in this country — that things *aren't* working for good — because none of us *is* truly loving God enough or following God's call. That doesn't sit very well. Even worse is the alternative, that in the midst of a pandemic the Christian response is a superficial platitude that everything is going to be okay.

But everything is not okay. A pandemic itself is bad enough, but the poor judgment and failures of leadership and wasted opportunities that have greatly exacerbated human suffering are not okay. People of color being subjected to disrespect, mistreatment, and violence for *centuries* is not okay. Federal troops attacking nonviolent protestors is not okay.

God works all things together for good for those who love God? All things? Even terrible things? Are the terrible things really predestined? Justified? Glorified? Somehow if this beautiful, poetic, reassuring text from Paul is just used to gloss over human-made suffering because it will all be good in the end — well, that's not okay, either.

C.S. Lewis wrote a novel called *Perelandra* about an Eden-like planet of paradise that has not experienced a fall into sin. A man from earth is sent to the planet to try to keep the inhabitants from succumbing to temptation and committing a first sin. As the man looks around at the wonders of paradise, untainted by sin and suffering and pain, he concludes, "God can make good use of all that happens. But the loss is real."

God can make good use of all that happens. But the loss is real. The sin of the world causes real loss, real pain, real suffering. And it is within that real suffering that we find ourselves. And some days, it is just crushingly real.

Paul knows the loss is real. It is there on our breath, in our sighs too deep for words, when we don't know how to open our schools safely and we don't know how to educate kids well at home, and we know that kids and their families are already struggling, and that the weakest and most vulnerable are the mostly likely to be left behind.

In these chapters in Romans, Paul is making an argument about the salvation of humanity through Jesus Christ. Today's passage is the capstone; it is the final reassurance for those who believe and follow Jesus — affirmation of the unshakable love of God, in whom we have hope. This love of God knows our weaknesses and meets us there. It is love that comes to us through the Spirit when our prayers are so deep they are wordless groans and sighs. It is love that is *for* us, it is love *in favor of* humanity. It is love that is present even when it is hard to see, even when there are no good options, and we're out of ideas, and the loss is real, and exhausting, and feels never-ending.

I don't believe Paul's intention is to justify suffering. I believe Paul is justifying *keeping hope alive* when there aren't good reasons to. It may even be that Paul is arguing that we can't let suffering win; that precisely in the face of suffering is when we need to look each other in the eye and say, "We were told this could happen. Keep hope alive. This is not the last word."

A lot has been written about Representative John Lewis in recent weeks, especially since his death but also in light of the renewed action and protest for racial equality and justice. I suspect most of us already know the stories of his multiple arrests and beatings as he protested nonviolently during the Civil Rights movement. Since I now live in Nashville, I have the privilege of sharing proximity with that history. (photo) Our downtown public library has a Civil Rights Room that looks out onto Church Street and Seventh Avenue where the lunch counter sit-ins were organized by John Lewis and other students from local Black colleges.¹ I read this week that John Lewis was arrested at least 45 times. In one of his most famous mugshots he is smiling because, as he put it, "I was on the right side of history."²

Keep hope alive. This is not the last word.

¹ See photo at <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/07/17/nation/john-lewis-lion-civil-rights-era-with-long-celebrated-career-congress-has-died-diagnosed-with-cancer-2019/>

² See photo at <https://twitter.com/repjohnlewis/status/622844317162434560>.

I've been hearing stories this week about friends in Portland who have been joining the "wall of moms" — a group of women in yellow t-shirts who are forming a human barrier between Black Lives Matter protestors and federal troops in downtown Portland. The moms wear bicycle helmets and homemade masks, and they link arms and sing songs.³ (Photo) Some of them were joined this week by dads wielding hockey sticks to knock back tear gas canisters and carrying leaf blowers to dissipate the fumes. These are ordinary folks who are turning up in the dark to take a stand. It is tempting to glorify their efforts, but in truth what they're doing is coming to the realization that *others* have been facing persecution and peril and sword. (Photo) Instead of staying home and minding their own business, these folks are joining the ranks of those who have already been fighting the battle.⁴

A poet named Lynn Ungar wrote about these protestors and their leafblowers. She says,

"Leafblowers are an instrument of the devil. They snarl from across the street when you were trying to sleep, and pollute the air with dust and gas and pointlessly blow leaves around for the next gust to bring right back where they started. Good people use a rake or a broom, as God intended.

"I knew this, clear as day, until the dads showed up at the protest, joined the wall of moms with fists upraised, singing *hands up, don't shoot* in tones that could comfort a baby. The dads brought hockey sticks to bat away the canisters of tear gas, and leaf blowers to disburse the gas back whence it came.

"I don't trust anyone who tells me what God intends. Nonetheless, I will tell you this: God means for us to use the tools we have on hand to protect what is threatened, and growing."⁵

Keep hope alive. This is not the last word.

And so, good people, who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship or distress or a pandemic or face masks or persecution or quarantine or famine or Fox News or nakedness or suppressed voting or protests or peril or tear gas or sword? No. All of these things are no match for the love of Jesus, in which we find our hope.

³ See photos here: <https://thewallofmoms.com>.

⁴ For more, see <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/24/us/portland-oregon-protests-white-race.html>.

⁵ See poem here:

<https://www.facebook.com/poetlynnungar/photos/a.2741633652622803/3055952864524212/?type=3&theater>.

For I am convinced 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.

Keep hope alive. This is not the last word.