**God Knows**

**July 28, 2024**

**Pentecost 10**

Romans 8: 18-39 Russell Mitchell-Walker

Psalm 139

This week we have been hearing about the devastation of Jasper due to an aggressive wildfire. As some who had been evacuated watch the news and worry about their homes and businesses, others knew by news reports that their home or business had been totally destroyed. It must be devastating to be in this kind of situation, feeling helpless and powerless to the ravages of nature, and the consequences of climate change. This is one example of the kind of suffering we hear about on a day to day basis. There is so much more, from the continuing devastation in Ukraine and the ongoing genocide in Gaza, to the rise of authoritarianism and fascism in the US, Europe and the threat of it even here in Canada, to ongoing reports of racism, limiting of rights due to transphobia, and homophobia, to sexual abuse and violent crime and terrorism, to the plight of the houseless and increasing amounts of drug poisonings. Add to that the things that we may be going through in our personal or family lives that are a struggle, whether it be grief and loss, mental health, relationship challenges, abuse, addictions, or any number of other issues, it can feel overwhelming and challenging. We may feel powerless and helpless at times.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans knew about these feelings, and he knew the Roman Christian community were experiencing suffering. So, he wrote to them the words of encouragement we heard in the reading this morning. Too often this passage is considered personally but it is written to the community, to encourage and support them, in their challenges. He informs them that the Spirit of God knows their suffering and helps all of us in our weakness. When we are struggling with pain and suffering or even feeling for someone else who is suffering, we may not know how to pray, what to pray. That doesn’t matter, Paul tells us, because the Spirit knows what we are going through and prays for us, with sighs to deep for words. That is such a wonderful expression, sighs to deep for words. It is unexplainable but comforting. To know that the Spirit is praying with and for us, knowing what we need, even when we don’t. This is important to remember when we are in crisis, pain, or suffering.

The next section indicates that all things work together for good for those who love and serve God. Now this does not mean that everything that happens is good, is for a reason, or even intended by God to happen. But that God is with us through whatever happens and with the support of God’s love and the community, there can be good that comes out of it. That together we can find goodness in everything. We make meaning. It may not be in that moment and indeed may take a long time, but God is with us in the suffering and with the love and support experienced from others, which is God in and through us, goodness can be found. We need to work through and feel through the pain, to make our way to what goodness there may be. It may be only that we experience God’s love in community that helps us through. And that is enough, that is goodness. That, I believe, is Pauls’ message to the community.

Paul then talks about predestination, that those whom God knew would be destined to conform to the image of God. This has developed into a doctrine of predestination that before we are born God determined who would be destined to be God’s children and inherit eternal life. However, this is not at all what Paul is talking about and it is an unfortunate interpretation. According to Gerald Cragg, professor of systematic theology, this passage is not referring to God’s will for certain humans but is more about that we, that life, is surrounded by God’s love and transformed by God’s grace. What is predetermined is that God loves all and God’s grace is unconditional. It is something we can always count on.

This leads to the powerful conclusion of this passage, where Paul celebrates that God is for us, and if God is for us, who can be against us? Even when we face trials or challenges from the powers or feel powerless, God is still for us, with us, and God’s love will sustain us, regardless what we face. If we look at the list of what cannot separate us from God’s love, and think about the powers and challenges of our time, we might rewrite the verses to read:

“What can separate us from the love of Christ?...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 patriarchy, nor sexism, nor homophobia, nor transphobia, nor racism, nor immigration status, nor poverty, nor disability, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

This is a message of hope and sustenance for our time.

The Psalm is also a message of hope and sustenance for our time. Like the Spirit Paul names in Romans, the Psalmist names that we are known by God. There is nowhere that we can go that God is not with us. Even when we try to run away, the best place for us is with God, even when we are in darkness or suffering, God is with us, in light and love and support.

I wish to share this story of one pastor’s experience of this Psalm, a story of mental health, by Rev Dr Emily Heath, of the Congregational Church in Exeter NH, of the United Church of Christ, US.

She writes:

The month I turned 22 I was in the middle of a years-long fight against clinical depression. I had my college degree in hand (double major in four years), I was starting a new graduate program (seminary, no less), and I had loving friends and family.

I had everything to live for, and yet, I was fighting against soul-crushing feelings of hopelessness and sadness every day. I thought something must be spiritually wrong with me. After all, if you love God, and believe in the love and grace of Christ, how can you not be joyful? I believed that as a Christian I was a failure.

In the midst of this, I chose to reaffirm my baptism. I didn't know the Psalm whose words the minister chose that day. I didn't yet know about this God who knew me at the depths of my soul, and yet still loved me. It didn't strike me until then that God could know about my depression and still love me and believe I was "fearfully and wonderfully made."

Years, nearly decades, later I tell this story publicly with some trepidation. There is still profound stigma about mental illness. It's the same stigma I carried with me at 22. I saw my clinical depression as a moral failure, something bad that was happening to me because I was not strong enough to will myself well.

I didn't know then about how my particular brain chemistry made it hard for serotonin to be reabsorbed, for instance. I didn't know that in any given year, 6.7% of American adults are currently suffering through a clinical depression. I also didn't know that many of the people I looked up to and respected, including many clergy members, had gone through the same thing, or something similar. Which is why I tell you this now.

Depression tells many lies. One of them is that we are somehow beneath God's love. But it just isn't true. God knows us, and God knows when we suffer. God loves us immensely in those moments, and I truly believe God wants healing for us.

The job of the church is not to create stigmas that keep people from getting help. It's to break those stigmas apart and offer God's hope. If you are suffering, don't listen to the lies of the disease. Instead, listen to God's hope. And then, make the phone call for help that you've been putting off. Fill that antidepressant prescription you said you'd never need. Tell your pastor, or your friends.

You are fearfully and wonderfully made, and as a child of God, you deserve to feel that way.

May we truly know God’s love and presence with us, and draw on that love and support that surrounds us in our communities of love. When we feel powerless and overwhelmed, may we remember that the spirit prays for us with sighs too deep for words. May we know that there are no powers that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus and may that sustain us when the powers of the world seek to divide and conquer. May we remember that love is stronger than fear and hate, and God’s love is ever present, uniting, and more powerful than anything on earth.