

Growing Pains

by Glenn Brumbaugh

So when we think of our faith journeys as Christians, what does it look like? Is it choosing to accept and follow Jesus, possibly followed by baptism and some sort of formality which officially makes us part of a group of Christians? Do we then happily live our lives in bliss, looking forward to our own ends and the heaven that awaits us, with nary a negative thought or emotion again? Or does the reality look a little different than that?

I don't know if you picked up on it this earlier, but our reading from Romans has quite a lot of groaning in it.: Creation groaning, Christians groaning, the Spirit groaning. Maybe this isn't such an easy walk in the park after all. In fact, Paul describes this groaning as akin to that of childbirth. I don't know firsthand, but my understanding is that is an event full of considerable discomfort to say the least. So why is there all this groaning, discomfort, and lack of fulfillment? After all, when we make that decision to turn our lives to Christ, aren't we supposed to be with the "in crowd," the ones that win the big prize at the end? Shouldn't the confidence we have in living our lives as God intended, the assurance in our salvation through the grace of God, give us all the peace of mind we require?

Well, the problem is, while we as God's children may be destined for glory, that glorification is something down the road, in an indefinite future that we cannot discern the timeframe of, and we are left with having to grapple with something

called patience. Patience to wait until God's plans come to fruition, or patience for our physical journey to run its course and we experience glory in the life to come. But having to wait, in anticipation, not having any idea how long the wait will be, would make anyone groan.

Is there anybody who doesn't struggle with patience at times?

I'm an amazingly patient person; I really don't mind waiting in line for most things. When others get increasingly riled up in a long line at the DMV, or the grocery store, I just relax and get lost in my own thoughts, remaining calm and cool as a cucumber. That however changes when I'm on the freeway. It's probably a good thing that I drive alone with the windows up most of the time, pastor that I am. I've also gotten good at keeping my hand gestures below dash level most of the time. Now don't misunderstand, they aren't obscene gestures, just gestures of exasperation. Coming from the East to the ever so polite driving Pacific Northwest, I find myself taking deep breaths and counting to myself much more frequently, to try to belay my natural responses.

I think we all can identify with those things in life that try our patience. But Paul is making the case in today's epistle reading that we all suffer from a generalized impatience because of the contradiction between how things should be, and how things really are. If we think about it, that's usually the cause for our own personal impatience. We have an idea of what we think a situation should be, and when what we experience differs, we become upset and impatient.

Likewise, God intended for all of Creation, including us, to go according to a certain plan, and the reality differed from the original design for things.

So there is discord, impatience, groaning. Which is where sin factors in.

Often we think of sin in terms of our own personal behavior, of violating this rule or that commandment, in very legalistic terms. But I would argue that one of the main points Jesus made in his ministry was that legalism was not so helpful. All those rules were originally meant to keep us from doing things that went against God's original plans for us, and for the creative order that we were made a part of. Jesus argued that we got too lost in the details of the rules that we lost our focus of seeking the perfection of the just world God intended. Sin, from that point of view, is anything that separates us from God and God's plan for us. And that plan is the first ray of hope we have in the "groaning" times we find ourselves in.

We are God's elect, We are daughters and sons of God, adopted children in the family with Christ as the first born. Likewise, there is a design for the world in which we live as well. Our impatience is with the not knowing the details, with struggling with the seeming randomness of what happens around us daily. The never-ending drone of negative events and tragedies: school shootings that seem to be routine these days, unarmed protestors, including children, being intentionally shot and killed in what is supposed to be the "Holy Land," growing racism and intolerance in the "Land of the Free," the list goes on and on.

We grow frustrated and despondent because our human reasoning and intellect cannot discern how any of this can lead to the glory we and creation are supposedly bound for. But that is the point that both Paul and Jesus are making in our lessons today. It is beyond our understanding on our own. Our human capacities are insufficient to discern God's plan and our role in that plan.

Which brings us to the Pentecost portion of our discussion.

Too often we focus on figuring this all out on our own, letting our pride get in the way. But Jesus makes clear that we can't handle all that we need at once. It's beyond us. If the early disciples who spent years being taught by the Messiah himself couldn't grasp it and needed help, we surely are in need of a hand up with all of this, that is, if we're willing to accept the help of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit that's provided to us, and not get in the way with our own reasoning.

A U.S. Lutheran bishop tells of visiting a parish church in California and finding a stirring red and orange banner on the wall. "Come Holy Spirit. Hallelujah!" it declared in words printed under a picture of a fire burning. The bishop was also interested in the sign directly underneath the banner, which said: "Fire extinguisher." The question is, how many of us carry our own fire extinguishers with us, to tame the fire that the Spirit brings into our lives, so we can try to do it on our own?

Kyle Idleman in his book, *Not a Fan*, says that "the only way to be filled with the Spirit is to empty myself to me. When I empty me of me, it provides space for the Holy Spirit to fill me. The more he fills me the less room there is for me." Jesus

tells us we need the Advocate in our lives to show us the meaning that we can't grasp on our own. And I'm sure we all would like better understanding of this world that we often can't make sense out of. But along with that knowledge also comes the other role which Jesus references, the promotion of justice through the exposure of injustice.

In the translation we used to today, it reads that the Advocate will "prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment." However, the Greek word translated, *elencho*, more literally translates as "expose to light." The Spirit's role in this case is to expose to the light of day the injustice and fallacies of morality that the world promotes. "The Spirit will guide you into all the truth." In a world that no longer values inconvenient "facts," some real truth would be a seemingly welcome addition. But we need to be careful what we seek. With truth also comes responsibility. While we have the promise of glory at the end of our life's journey, we have the responsibility to seek the kingdom of God that draws near. Part of overcoming these growing pains of belief, this groaning impatience, is to take the opportunity to take action to make the truth a reality.

Scottish minister and theologian George Matheson who was blind since his youth wrote, "We commonly associate patience with lying down. We think of it as the angel that guards the couch of the invalid. Yet there is a patience that I believe to be harder – the patience that can run. To lie down in the time of grief, to be quiet under the stroke of adverse fortune, implies a great strength; but I know of something that implies a strength greater still: it is the power to work under

stress; to have a great weight at your heart and still run; to have a deep anguish in your spirit and still perform the daily tasks. It is a Christ-like thing! The hardest thing is that most of us are called to exercise our patience, not in the sickbed but in the street.”

So as we remember the gift of the Holy Spirit this morning on that Pentecost millennia ago, what will we do?

We have the Advocate sent by God to help and direct us, to enlighten us as we have need, even to groan for and with us in our impatience and frustration. Do we empty ourselves of our own priorities to let the Spirit in? Are we willing to seek the truth the Spirit brings into the light, and speak that truth to power? Will we show our patience by lying down and waiting for glorification, or show the strength of the Spirit through our action in spite of our groans?

What choices will you make?

May the Spirit guide your prayers and decisions. Amen.