

Romans 8:28 We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to God's purpose.

Joan and I rode our bicycles to the Dairy Queen last week. In our family we have to earn our ice cream by pedaling a mile uphill. So we were up there eating our ice cream cones and a teenage boy sat next to me on the long bench and we began to talk. **His mannerisms, facial expressions, and even the tone of his voice, were familiar to me, but I couldn't place him, and was too embarrassed to ask his name.** Then his mother approached and I remembered who he was, the nephew of my best friend growing up, Tim. Tim died in 1981, but his nephew had many of the same qualities, which is why he seemed familiar. It was an odd experience, like having my best friend back for a moment.

In the first months after Tim died, I was very sad. It was my habit to arrive early each day to work, while it was quiet, and read the Bible. **One morning, I was reading the book of Romans and came upon this verse, "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to God's purpose."** I read that and was filled with a profound sense of joy and peace. I knew, I deeply knew, that Tim was alright and I would be alright too.

A lot of times we experience life as being in a valley, or we feel as if we're traveling along in the flatlands, nothing remarkable, life is just level. No valley, but no peaks, either. **But every now and then we have moments when we feel super-alive and deeply connected to others.** The psychologist Abraham Maslow called those moments "peak experiences." We feel a deep belonging. Instead of being down in a valley, we're at the peak, on the mountaintop. We are given a great view of life and it's a wonderful view. **We stand on the peak and say, "Oh, isn't this gorgeous. Isn't life wonderful. Isn't it great to be alive."**

So all those years ago, I read this verse from Romans, and for a moment was lifted to the mountain. It wasn't long, but it didn't need to be. Even now, 27 years later, the memory of that peak experience is still a powerful one.

That was my history with this verse, until this week, when I was talking with a woman about a man in our town who is suffering from cancer. **I have known him for many, many years.** Now he is married and has two teenage children and cancer. This woman approached me and asked how he was doing. I told her not well, and she said, almost flippantly, "Oh, well, we know that in everything God works for good with those who love him."

Then she asked, "Does he love God?"

“I don’t know. I’ve never asked him his opinion of God. He doesn’t appear to hate God.”

I’m not a mindreader, but I know this woman, and I think I know what she meant. **She meant that God only worked for good *with those who love him*, and that if someone doesn’t love God, God doesn’t work for good in their lives.**

The air went out of that verse for me. I’d always associated it with comfort and hope and promise and healing, and now it was a weapon. “If you don’t love God, you’re going to be in trouble. You’re going to be miserable. God only does good things for those who love him.”

It defies logic, but many, many Christians believe the things that happen to us in life are the direct result of our relationship with God. **They believe that if we pray, if we go to church, if we’re moral, if we’re kind, if we tithe, if we love God, then God owes it to us to bless us.** I don’t know how someone can live very long, how someone can see the wicked prosper, and the good suffer, and still believe that the circumstances in our lives are a direct consequence of our theology or faith. But they do. **They run into trouble, and you hear them mutter, “Why is God doing this to me? I must have been bad.”** Something good happens, they say, “The Lord is blessing my faithfulness.”

You know, the sweetest, kindest, most faithful woman I've ever met has a terminal disease, can't walk, has a daughter who is mentally ill, and her grandson recently passed away. Every week I meet wonderful people who've had it tough, who were knocked down, stood up, and were knocked down again. I have never in my life met anyone immune from suffering.

Here's what I've observed. God works for good for those who love him, and God works for good for those who hate him. The rain falls on the just, the rain falls on the unjust. God works for good for everyone. **Now what does it mean to say God is at work?** Does God intervene in the physical world and change circumstances? Not with any consistency. And if God does, I've not figured out the formula. **I've not figured out how to persuade God to do this thing or that thing.** There's a minister in my town who says he knows how to pray so God will heal people every time he prays for them. But if he had that ability, don't you think people would be lined up outside his church?

So what does it mean to say God works for something? To me, it means the arc of the universe tends toward a keener sense of justice, tends toward moral evolution, tends toward a higher human consciousness, tends toward increased awareness, tends toward a deepening sense of connection and belonging.

Today, we dedicated Kylee Grace. We gave thanks for her life. I couldn't be grateful for her life if I didn't trust the world she will inhabit is going to be incrementally better than the world I inhabit. **Will her world have its struggles, challenges, and pains?** Of course. But it will also have blessings and advantages so profound it would stun us were we to know them. When I was dedicated in a church in 1961, an African-American couldn't eat at a diner in the South. Now one is a candidate for President. That is the arc of justice, the arc of a higher human consciousness.

A lot of ancient peoples, and more than a few modern ones, thought God was this superman, of sorts, up in the sky, dispensing favors to those who loved him, cursing those who didn't. **That is a tempting thought, but neither reason nor experience bear it out.**

I believe God is the impulse for good which exists in all people, a light which enlightens each person, working in us, wooing us, if you will, to a higher path, a better way. Loving us when we succeed. Loving us when we fail. **But always, always, always inspiring us to be our better selves.** So how do we know when and where God is at work? Paul told us that, too. Where there is love and joy, peace and patience, kindness and goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, whenever and wherever those things occur, God's spirit is at work. (Galatians 5:22-23)