

Today Paul is giving the Romans—and us—a lens through which to see life more correctly and hence to live more wisely. He starts out by explaining why what he has to say applies to both Jews and Gentiles. It applies to both, despite their different histories with God, because both groups are human beings, and all human beings have the same need, which is to be in relationship with God. Then he sets out to show what it means for the choices we must make and the ways we can live, that everything starts with God “justifying” us.

Justification is an awkward word. It sounds like we need an excuse for God to accept us, but it’s more like right-justifying your margin: we’ve been brought into line with the way God works. And guess what: the way God works is not the way we’ve been accustomed to think the world works, and once we’re all lined up with God, we’re going to count on God’s method, and not on what we thought was inevitable.

How does God work? “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person-- . . . But God proves God’s love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” It is as if there were opposing armies, the army of sin and the army of God (sorry about the military metaphor), and we had gotten conscripted into the army of sin. The way God wins in this contest is not to annihilate the opposition but to encompass and adopt it—God *liberates* the opposing army. This is the principle Dr. King talked about in his sermon to the Detroit Council of Churches in Lent 1961: “. . . to return evil for evil only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe. And somewhere along the way of life, somebody must have sense enough,

somebody must have morality enough, somebody must have religion enough, to cut off the chain of hate and evil. And this can only be done by meeting hate with love. For you see in a real sense, if we return hate for hate, violence for violence, and all of that, it just ends up destroying everybody.” The way God works is to meet sin, opposition, hatred, and death with a love that just won’t take No for an answer. It’s slow, but it’s irresistible. But it’s slow. And like Dr. King and civil rights activists, we suffer as we love.

In the previous chapter, Paul had alluded to Abraham as an exemplar of faith because Abraham took the long view and hoped in God’s promise long before there was any evidence of its fulfillment. He left the place where he had grown up and journeyed to a place he wouldn’t know until God told him it was where he should stop. He counted on having a family even though he and Sarai had no children and no prospect of children. Abraham and Sarai *suffered* in the uncertainty and long years of waiting for God’s promise to be fulfilled. In the same way, the Romans could expect to suffer while they live as the transformed community.

God’s love is structured by action and self-sacrifice. This quality of love is what fills the hearts of those who are made “righteous”. So, while we hope to share in God’s glory, we the justified are ready to suffer as God in Christ does. Just as suffering was intrinsic to God’s reconciling love, so it is to those who have been reconciled. “We . . . know that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit . . .”

It’s important to notice that the suffering of which Paul speaks is collective.

Whatever the specific suffering might be, it is not experienced alone; it is shared. And this brings me to the insights of the writer Rebecca Solnit, who wrote a book called *A Paradise Built in Hell*, about the untold stories of transformation and redemption that take place amidst catastrophe. Rebecca Solnit was struck by the stories of looting and savage behavior that were told after Hurricane Katrina, most of which turned out not to be true. She wondered if there weren't ways of telling the stories of catastrophes that were more true—stories of hope. What she discovered was that, "When all the ordinary divides and patterns are shattered, people step up to become their brother's keepers. And that purposefulness and connectedness bring joy even amidst death, chaos, fear, and loss."

For example, a man who had survived a hurricane in October of 2003 told her about it. He didn't talk about the winds that roared at more than 100 mph and tore up trees, roofs, and telephone poles. He talked about the neighbors, and he lit up with happiness as he did so. All the people had come out of their houses to speak with each other, aid each other, improvise a community kitchen, make sure the elders were okay, and spend time together, no longer strangers. "Everybody woke up the next morning and everything was different," he mused. "There was no electricity, all the stores were closed, no one had access to media. The consequence was that everyone poured out into the street to bear witness. Not quite a street party, but everyone out at once—it was a sense of happiness to see everybody even though we didn't know each other."

As a child, Dorothy Day experienced something similar after the great earthquake in San Francisco. She remembered, "While the crisis lasted, people

loved each other,” and she dedicated her life to trying to realize and stabilize that love as a practical force in meeting the needs of the poor and making a more just and generous society. *Because of that moment of the earthquake* and moments of social engagement afterward, she was able to see this as *a reality* she had already tasted rather than as an abstract possibility. [quoted from *A Paradise Built in Hell*]

These are all examples that are easily overlooked or discounted because they don't fit into the dominant narrative of self-centeredness and hopelessness. We just disregard them, as if they weren't as real as the deaths and losses that happen with catastrophes. As the biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann wrote in *The Prophetic Imagination*, “Our consumer culture is organized against history. There is a depreciation of memory and a ridicule of hope.” But these stories are real too, and they show us the way of God—hope that does not disappoint us, because even when we suffer, God is at work to redeem our reality.

Rebecca Solnit said in an interview with Krista Tippett,

If you study history deeply, you realize that, to quote Patti Smith, “People have the power” — that popular power, civil society, has been tremendously powerful and has changed the world again and again and again; that we're not powerless; that things are very unpredictable and that people have often taken on things that seemed hopeless — freeing the slaves, getting women the vote — and achieved those things. **And I feel like so much of what we're burdened by is bad stories**, both people who have amnesia, who don't remember that the present was constructed by certain forces to serve certain elements and can be deconstructed and that things could be very different, that they have been very different, that things are always changing and that we have agency in that change.

What Paul is telling us is that not only are things always changing, but that *our* agency in that change connects to God's agency—that God *always* has a way through, that God's way involves love, and that love never ends, never quits, never

fails. That's the lens through which to see our own struggles for justice and peace—  
God plays the long game, but love is always going to win.

Gracious God, your son Martin Luther King told us that love is a display of strength. He said, *"Put us in jail, and we will go in with humble smiles on our faces, still loving you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we will still love you. . . . But be assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer."* May we tap into that strength in all our struggles, and turn our enemies into friends by your amazing power. Amen.