

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Kingsley East Gibbs
Remember, Repent, and Restore
Romans 8:12-25
July 23, 2023

Last week, the youth and I participated in Compassion Camp with our children's ministry, where we talked about having compassion for the whole world—all of God's creation, which includes people. We even learned a special chant together to remember what compassion is and how to show compassion. I'd like to invite the children and youth to help me teach it to you today. So, if you were at Compassion Camp, or if you learned our chant during formation this morning, would you stand up and say it with me? Repeat after me:

I see your hurt.
I feel your hurt.
I help ease your hurt.

Before Compassion Camp, I spent two weeks participating in an ethics fellowship in Germany and Poland. I spent the first week in Berlin and a few surrounding sites where the horrors of the Holocaust took place. Then I traveled northeast to Kraków, Poland, and from there went to the heart of the Holocaust tragedy: Auschwitz. During the Holocaust, some people saw the hurt inflicted on Jews and other persecuted people groups, and they helped ease their hurt by sheltering them and meeting their daily needs. But a great many, as we know, did not show compassion for one another. They did not help ease the hurt of those suffering around them but actually contributed to this evil.

One of the most important things that we believe as Christians is that we are here to love and care for everything and everyone God made. Regardless of our differences and fears, we are called to show compassion toward all living things. To do that, we must remember our story and who we are in Christ, repent and lament of all that we've done wrong as individuals and as generational communities, and then work with God to restore all of creation. As we continue learning from Paul's letter to the Romans today, this is what I want to share with you. We are called to remember who we are as both children of God and as sinners; to repent and lament for how we've lived into our sinfulness at the great expense of others, the world, and ourselves; and to restore the world with God through His Spirit in us.

Last week, Steve King helped us remember who we are according to Romans 8 and other Scripture verses. He even gave us a pamphlet to use as a daily reminder of who we are free to be in Christ. We have new identities in the Spirit. This is an incredibly hopeful, comforting truth, but with this freedom comes great responsibility. As Uncle Ben said in the OG Spiderman (the only Spiderman series I can keep straight now), "With great power comes great responsibility."

In Romans 8, verse 12, Paul says, "So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors." Before this verse, Paul tells the Romans that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,

gift of life comes an obligation: “so then, we are debtors.” This may sound odd. How can we receive a free gift and that gift come with an obligation?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, famous for his resistance in the Holocaust that led to his own death in a concentration camp, provides one of the clearest explanations of this kind of grace that comes with a cost. He contrasts cheap grace, the kind of grace that doesn’t free us from the toils of sin, with costly grace, which both condemns sin and justifies the sinner.¹ Bonhoeffer describes this grace saying, “It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life.”² It is a grace from God that we no longer live under sin’s control. Now, through this grace, we are freed into a new life under God’s will, which is the fullest human life.

When Paul talks about these two controlling powers, under the realm of sin or the realm of God, he uses the terms “flesh” and “spirit.” See verse 13: “for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” Paul is not saying that to have a body and meet people’s material needs is bad and leads to death. When he talks about living according to the flesh, Paul is talking about the realm of sin and death, not the material world. Life in the spirit, as Paul uses it, means the realm of God’s will and righteousness. As humans, we all have physical bodies and material needs, and we all live in a realm dominated by sinful forces. But as Christians, we still have those physical bodies and needs, but now we are called to live under the force of righteousness instead of sin. And we’re given the power of the Spirit to do this.

The goal of God’s grace and our freedom from condemnation isn’t just that we feel better about ourselves and our lives under the forces of sin and evil.³ It’s that we live in the freedom to not go on sinning. Paul says in verses 15-17: “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ...” As adopted heirs with Christ, we are now responsible to live ethically, to bear godly fruit, and to use our agency to work with God instead of resisting God’s will.

As heirs of God, we inherit the good and the bad of our Christian story.⁴ We get the beauty of creation and a God who wants to be in relationship with us, and we get the tragedy of the fall that cuts off our relationships with God, creation, and even ourselves. We get the triumphal freedom story of Exodus, and we get the faithless stories of grumbling and worshipping idols in the

¹ See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1959), 43-56.

² Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 45.

³ David E. Garland, *Romans: An Introduction and Commentary*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 256 says, “Paul’s chief concern is not that believers receive forgiveness and relief from the feeling of moral culpability, but rather that they can be delivered from the sinful flesh that makes inevitable the repeated swerving away from the will of God.”

⁴ Fleming Rutledge, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: Sermons from Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 247 says, “Inheritance, then, is a complex matter. We inherit the bad along with the good, the responsibility along with the privilege, the shame along with the pride.”

desert. We live in the life of the resurrected Christ, and we lament the death that we inflict over and over again as we oppress the least of these. As heirs of God, we must remember both aspects of our identities as Christians—the good and the bad. Because only when we remember who we are and what we’ve done with God and against God, can we learn how to move forward in repentance, lamentation, and restoration.

One way that we in our culture remember our history is through memorials. During my ethics fellowship, we visited many memorials and sites of encounter where horrible things happened during the Holocaust. The most moving memorial I encountered on my trip was at Track 17 at Grunewald Station in Berlin. This train track was used to deport thousands of Jews to camps, and usually to their deaths, between the years 1941-1945. The platform surrounding the track is lined with 186 steel plates. Engraved on each plate is the train’s departure date, the number of Jewish people deported, and their final destinations. Each plate, representing one train, ranged from dozens to hundreds to thousands of people taken from their homes and murdered.⁵

On the tracks, white trees are growing up between the rails. Fallen leaves and vegetation cover over parts of the tracks. This growth adds to the human-made memorial, offering a sign through the trees that no train will ever leave this track again.

At the first concentration camp we visited, called Sachsenhausen, I was overwhelmed by the woods that we drove and then walked through to approach the camp gate. It felt like a sin for there to be beauty in this place of such evil, devastation, and death. Inside Sachsenhausen, I put my hands on the bark of a huge tree at the center of the camp. I sat under its shade with my hands in the dirt, watching ants crawl past my fingers. How many prisoners walked under this same shade, maybe feeling a moment of relief from the sun? How many people collapsed here on this earth from exhaustion, abuse, and despair? Walking inside the camp felt like stepping on people’s graves. And this tree bore witness to these atrocities.

It was impossible for me to walk through concentration camps and not ask, where was God? Where is God now? How could an all-loving, all-powerful God not stop this? What do we as Christians do with this extreme evil? How do we understand it?

During my own dark night of the soul, when despair overwhelmed me and I couldn’t make any sense of my suffering and the senseless evil in the world, it was Romans 8 that gave me answers to the problem of evil that I could live with. Midway through verse 17, Paul says that if we suffer with Christ, we will be glorified with him. He continues in verse 18, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.” Now, these verses are true and comforting, but they can also be misused to encourage suffering or to minimize the agony of suffering. Paul isn’t prescribing suffering; he’s talking about Jesus redeeming suffering. Suffering in this life doesn’t foreshadow eternal suffering. Just as Jesus flipped our expectations about the Messiah by coming to us humbly in a manger, riding on a donkey, and then suffering a criminal’s crucifixion, Paul is reminding the Romans that their suffering isn’t a sign of divine damnation. In the Romans’ world, and in our world today, many of us live with the misconception that if we are blessed with good things, it’s because God favors

⁵ See Clint Smith, “Monuments to the Unthinkable: America still can’t figure out how to memorialize the sins of our history. What can we learn from Germany?” *The Atlantic*, December 2022, 22-41.

us, but if we are going through trials, we're being punished for our sins. In God's upside-down kingdom, in spite of our suffering and through our suffering, we will one day be glorified with God.

So, suffering is not based on God's retribution for our sins. Also, suffering is not an isolated issue that only affects individuals. Paul says in verses 19-21, "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God." Creation is waiting with eager longing to be freed from bondage. One day, God will make the earth itself new and whole with God's children. But since the fall, all of creation has lived under the curses of Genesis 3 and felt the weight of decay and death.

This brings us to verse 22: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now." This is the verse I hold onto in places like Auschwitz, in places of incomprehensible evil, suffering, and death. All of creation is groaning under the weight of sin. Therefore, we are not alone. Even when people forsake us and God goes silent, the trees surround us. They groan with us and for us, against us and for those we oppress. And creation shouldn't groan alone. Paul says in verse 23, "and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies." Christians should groan against sin. We shouldn't be able to contain our deep sorrow that we've been promised redemption, yet we still live with suffering. And this groaning, the recognition that the world is not as it should be, should lead us deeper into the work before us now.

When we see the sin and suffering around us, we must repent of the role we play in perpetuating sin. In repentance, we turn away from sin toward God and new life in the Spirit. We also lament the sufferings of the world, regardless of who caused it. I was born decades after the Holocaust, but I lament the human tragedy that occurred then. Evil is worth expressing our grief and sorrow through lamentations. And suffering deserves a witness. Creation, memorials, and storytellers are each witnesses beckoning us to remember the sins of the world so that we will repent, lament, and work to restore it.

There are images from the woods in Auschwitz that will always haunt me—photographs of people surrounded by the same trees that stood around me. Those trees are a witness still screaming for those who were silenced and murdered. And creation doesn't only speak in Auschwitz.

Can you hear the trees screaming around us here in Waco? The lynching trees on our land are waiting with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God (v. 19).

Just this year, Waco erected a historical marker for Jesse Washington to memorialize "The Waco Horror," when this seventeen-year-old black teenager was lynched in the year 1916. Historians say some 10-15,000 people came out to watch and participate in this lynching. 10-15,000 people from Waco and the surrounding areas, from largely Christian communities. Lord, have mercy. Lord, have justice.

In his book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, James Cone says, “Suffering naturally gives rise to doubt. How can one believe in God in the face of such horrendous suffering as slavery, segregation, and the lynching tree? Under these circumstances, doubt is not a denial but an integral part of faith. It keeps faith from being sure of itself. But doubt does not have the final word. The final word is faith giving rise to hope.”⁶ Hope is Paul’s final word in our text today. Verses 24-25 say: “For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.”

What is hope in the face of the Holocaust?

What is hope in the face of systemic racism, climate change, domestic violence, poverty, cancer?

What is hope when your spouse or your parent or your best friend in the world abandons you?

What is hope when God goes silent and seems to let the world perish over and over again?

Hope is patient, meaning that hope persists for as long as restoration takes. Hope is communal. We hope alongside a community of believers, calling each other to remember who we are, who God is, and what God promises us. Together, we repent and lament when we fall short of the fullness of life in Christ. We also hope alongside all of creation—rocks and trees that were here before us and will live on after us, bearing witness to the good and bad of our stories. I want to be clear; there is hope for all of us—victims and perpetrators alike—each of us both at different times in our lives. When God puts an end to evil, God doesn’t only redeem victims; God makes a way for perpetrators to repent and be restored, too. Finally, hope itself is restorative. Hope ushers us out of despair. Through hope, God gives us a vision of what the world can be and the courage to continue working when we cannot see.

We know who will ultimately save the world from sin, suffering, and death: Jesus Christ.

Because we are in Jesus Christ, we are empowered to participate in this restorative work until God completes it. Amen.

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⁶ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 106-107.