

“Forward”  
June 14, 2020

Joel 2:25-28  
Romans 8:35-39

Back in mid-April as the reality of the pandemic was setting in, a lot of people thought that maybe it would just be best to push the reset button and start 2020 all over again.

Of course, the word of that old Tears for Fears song from the mid-80’s help us face the reality: “Welcome to your life. There’s no turning back.”

That’s the curious thing about time: for reasons we don’t really understand, it only moves forward.

There is no do-over, even if things aren’t going as we would want them to go.

It might be that the recent high school graduates know this as well as anyone.

Most were born in 2002 in the aftermath of 9/11 a time of great uncertainty that led to endless war in the Middle East and great trepidation in our nation. They were around 6 or 7 when the Flood of 2008 hit Iowa City, displacing people from their homes and leaving many places under water. Later that same year the Great Recession began, displacing people from their homes and leaving many under water. Their senior year was disrupted when the pandemic arrived and closed the schools. And by the weekend of their graduation—a protracted affair that stretched over several days—our nation was grieving and angry and protesting over the murder of George Floyd as we continued to live in the systemic racism that ensnares all of us in different ways.

There’s no turning back.

There is no reset button.

Graduates—and the rest of us as well—all of us can only move forward.

This morning, then, I want to talk with the graduates—and the rest of us as well—as we all look for ways to move forward into the future that is both unknown and always open to our creating.

So this is, in a sense a baccalaureate sermon for people of all ages.

Anne Lamott wrote: “When God is doing something wonderful, He or She always starts with a hardship; when God is doing something amazing, He or She starts with an impossibility.”

That’s kind of where we’re at right now. Offered hardship. Given impossibility. How will we make lives that matter in the midst of pandemic and economic turmoil and heightened awareness of the great prejudice and injustice in our nation?

The good news is that as we move forward we are creating the future that only comes into being as we act. That is to say, the future is not set. It is what we make it.

Science can help.

Physicists are now aware of subatomic particles that hover in and around everything that exists.

Someone pointed out that “One interesting characteristic of these particles is that they seem to take on the properties or expectations of the scientists studying them. This has led to the speculation that these particles may be the creative building blocks of the universe. It is as though all matter is surrounded by hovering possibilities waiting only to be spoken to in order to become.

“If these particles surround us all, then each of us is currently and constantly creating the future by what we say and think whether or not we are aware of doing so.”<sup>1</sup>

Science gives us an image of our involvement with all of creation in creating the future.

Scripture can help.

When Paul writes to that early Christian congregation in Rome, he recognizes that we are broken human beings, each of us hurting and being hurt.

Paul is clear that each of us is caught up doing the very things we don’t want to do—and not doing the good we desire. That is, Paul identifies each of us and all of us as, well, sinners—those cut off from God, our neighbor, and the best in ourselves—who make choices and take actions that hurt others and ourselves.

And yet, we are loved by God and can still love one another.

Paul is not afraid to focus our attention on the lowest points of life. He reminds the Romans—and he reminds us—of times when we have sighed and groaned with bitterness, when God seemed nowhere to be found—*or absent*. In just such times, Paul says, we are reminded of the sustaining love of God. This faith affirms our struggle, calls forth our resilience, and helps us to move through the darkness.

Paul writes about “persecution, hunger, nakedness, danger and sword”—all very real threats to our well-being. I’m sure you can think of others—this list, like all of the lists Paul writes, is not meant to be complete. Today we might add Covid and racism and violence to the list of things that threaten us or those we know.

But these threats do not mean our defeat. John Calvin put it this way: “Though clouds obscure the clear view of the sun, they do not entirely deprive us of its light. So, in our adversity, the rays of God’s grace shine through darkness so that we need not give in to despair.”

God’s mercy, the prophet affirms, is fresh every morning, as sure as the sunrise. God’s desire is that we would be fully alive, fully in contact with all that gives life. We will always struggle with evil, we will always be tempted to give in and give up, for that is a part of living.

But, as Paul reminds us, we are not alone in our struggles. We are not alone in our despair. God is for us. Even in adversity, even in failure, we can still attempt great things, we can still pursue excellence in all that we do.

This is what the older members of this congregation have learned as they have lived through years of war and protest and racism and nuclear threat and affluence and all the other difficulties that have beset us in the past ninety-some years.

This, I hope—and I believe—is what this year’s graduating seniors are learning at a young age. They have accomplished a great deal even though the past years have been difficult. They have created music, they have written and spoken with conviction, they have competed as athletes. Their gifts and their abilities and their concern will be greatly needed in the decades ahead as we move through and beyond the challenges of these days.

We are not alone. God is with us.

And we are with each other.

Welcome to your life—whatever your age.

There’s no turning back. So we go forward together.

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<sup>1</sup> Page: 3

Laurie Beth Jones, *The Path*, pg. 72-73