

Helping All Things Work For Good
Romans 8:18-30
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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One of my favorite short stories is **The Verger**. What's a Verger? A Verger is the official in the Church of England who takes part in divine services and also takes care of the church, sort of a janitor with liturgical responsibilities.

Well, this short story is about the verger of St. Peter's Church, Neville Square, located in London. His name was Albert Foreman and for sixteen years he quietly and faithfully discharged his duties at St. Peter's.

For the first fifteen years he served under a kindly pastor. Albert liked serving under the old man and was sad when he was replaced by a new young vicar.

Then one day this new vicar called Albert into his office..."**Foreman,**" the vicar began, "**I've got something rather unpleasant to say to you. The most extraordinary circumstance has come to my attention. I discovered to my astonishment, that you can neither read nor write...Well, this situation is impossible at a church like St. Peter, we cannot have a verger who cannot read. We don't want to be harsh...so we'll give you three months to learn and if by the end of that time you still cannot read or write we'll have to let you go.**"

Albert replied, "**Sorry sir, I'm afraid it's no good, I'm too old a dog to learn new tricks.**"

So, Albert resigned and went home. On his way home he decided to smoke his pipe. He looked for a tobacco shop, but even though it was a long street with many shops, there was not one tobacco shop. "**That's strange,**" he thought, "**I can't be the only one who walks this street and wants a pipe. A fellow could do very well with a little tobacco and sweet shop here.**"

He turned and went home and thought about the possibilities and the next day again walked the same street and by good luck found an empty store that looked as though it would exactly suit him. Twenty four hours later he rented it, and with his savings, set up his new business and very quickly did very well. In fact, he did so well that a year later he started a second shop and put a manager in it.

This was a success too...but that wasn't the end. In the course of ten years, he acquired 10 shops and was making money hand over fist. He went around to all of them every Monday, collected the week's takings and took them to the bank.

One morning as he entered the bank, he was shown into the bank manager's office. "**Mr. Foreman,** he said, "**I want to talk with you about the money you've got deposited**

with us. It's a very large sum to have on deposit and I should have thought you'd do better to invest it." Albert replied, "I've never had anything to do with stocks and bonds." The manager smiled, "We'll do everything. All you'll have to do is sign the transfers next time you come in." "I suppose I could do that, I guess, said Albert, but how would I know what I'm signing?" "I suppose you could read it," the manager said sharply. Mr. Foreman smiled, "That's just it, I can't read."

The manager was so surprised that he jumped up and stared at him. "That's the most extraordinary thing I ever heard! You mean to say you built up this important business and amassed a fortune without being able to read or write? Good Heavens man, just think of what you'd be now if you had been able to read."

"I can tell you that sir, Mr. Foreman said with a grin, I'd be verger of St. Peter's Church."

Whenever I read this story I remember what Paul wrote 1900 years earlier. "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him who are called according to his purpose." When you put the story of the verger in the context of this Scripture, it becomes a parable that reminds us our lives are in God' hands. Things will happen that are not within God's will, but when you are willing to place you trust in God and then do all you can to make the best of your situation if you look hard enough, you can see how God steps in and turns stumbling blocks into stepping stones that lead you closer into the Kingdom. You may feel utterly defeated, but it's when you feel your greatest despair that God brings about his greatest purpose. Of course that doesn't mean your crisis could ever be recalled with fondness, in fact, you may even say "I'd never want to go through that again."

But as God heals your wounds with the passing of time you can begin to realize those terrible times were essential to your growth and your appreciation for the mystery of God encountering your life. Of course, during those terrible times most likely you can't see this. It's hard to sense God working out his purposes when you feel like you're the one being worked over. Hard, but not impossible, because simply asking God to place within you the desire to trust is a step in faith that God always honors. And don't be upset if your patience and trust don't come easily. Some of us are ready for it, others are not. That's why being in a community is so important. We take turns being strong and weak together as we carry each other's burdens.

Case in point. During World War II, Corrie Ten Boom and her sister landed in a Nazi Concentration Camp for the high crime of hiding Jews. On their first night in camp, they learned their barracks was flea infested. Corrie was crest fallen. This was the last straw, insult to injury. Her sister preached hope. "Remember," she said, "all things work together for good." Soon after they learned the fleas were part of God's sovereign love! The fleas were so bad, they kept the brutish guards from coming into the barracks and keeping them from holding midnight worship services and helping each other survive.

Big question! "So, how can you see God's grace and draw power from Christ's presence so when you're in your next spiritual crisis you can be prepared and trust God's sovereign love makes all things work together for good?"

Maybe this will help: remember Jesus absolutely alone and panicked in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion. Jesus knew the next day he must die for the sins of the world. Faced with the greatest crisis of his life, he prayed "**Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me.**" Luke tells us Jesus was in agony and his beads of sweat became like drops of blood as they fell to the ground. This is the image of the full humanity of Christ which you and I are invited to enter into.

Just like you and me, Jesus did not relish his spiritual crisis, but trusting His Father he embraced it. He knew his whole life was a preparation for Good Friday. But doubts emerged. Don't fool yourself. Jesus could have rationalized his way out of his predicament. But he didn't. Instead, after going back and forth that terrible night Jesus absolutely and unconditionally surrendered his will to his Abba Father. Total trust. Complete obedience. Now Jesus' will complimented heaven's will. It all came together for good as Jesus completed his anguished prayer with, "**Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done.**"

But there's one more thing that needs to be said. Paul also wrote in the 8th chapter of Romans, "**those whom God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son.**" Paul uses a word here that for better or for worse has been forever linked to Presbyterians. The word is Predestination. A lot of folks think predestination means that zillions of years ago, before God created the world, he decided who would go to heaven and who would go to hell. In other words, you and I have no say in the matter. There's no free will, we are preprogrammed to either go to heaven or hell. But that's not what predestination means.

The old catechism question can help us here. "**What is the chief end of man?**" The answer: "**The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.**" So predestination means everyone God ever created is predestined to be conformed in Christ's image. That's God's will for us! The big question is this, is it our will?

So next time your life takes a cruel turn and you feel like the sun, the moon and the stars are crashing on top of you, remember the story of the verger, also remember the story of Corrie Ten Boom and her sister saved by the fleas at Ravensbruck Concentration Camp, and especially remember Jesus' anguished prayer in the garden. These stories are your story too, showing us all things do work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose.

Let us pray!