

Everything Works for Good©
Romans 8:26-30; Acts 28:1-10 September 16, 2012 Sharlyn Gates

I love that passage from Romans 8, where Paul says God works all things together for good. I've found that to be true in every turn of my journey in life. Even the most difficult, hardest things that have happened, I can look back later and see that there were good things that developed out of the things that seemed so bad at the time.

My sister, Cindy, and I have a thing we say to each other when something goes wrong ... "I wonder what God is doing with you now!" Paul says God works all things for good for those who love God. We love God, but more importantly, we know God loves us, so we have to trust that God is in the situation and will do something with it to redeem even the worst times.

Except that I don't believe that it is God who causes bad things to happen. I don't think God caused Cindy's husband, Warren, to have diabetes so bad that the infection in his foot nearly cost him to lose that foot, several times over, in the last few years.

I don't believe God caused the angry mob in Libya to take the life of the American Ambassador there, or the others who were killed this past week.

I don't think God causes horrible things to happen in order to show us that God is in charge. We aren't puppets on a string being manipulated in whatever direction God chooses for us.

The key here is that God loves us and uses our worst situation ... even when it is caused by our own poor choice ... and can cause something good to come from it. Perhaps there is a reconciliation of family members who come together at the time of a death in the family.

Perhaps there is an opportunity to show grace and hospitality to strangers, or, the chance to share God's love with someone who never knew it before.

That's what happened with Paul and Luke and all those who were shipwrecked. Luke tells us the ship that was taking Paul to Rome as a prisoner was caught in terrible storms and ended up crashing on a reef some distance from an island, and the ship starting breaking up.

Some of the men on board starting swimming to the shore, while others clung to pieces of the ships boards, holding on for dear life until they floated to the beach.

Every single one of them was saved that day, but they were wet and cold. So Paul, even though he was a prisoner, servant to others that he was, starting gathering wood and starting a bonfire so all could get warm.

It's kind of ironic, isn't it, that after all that Paul had been through ... beatings, prison, storms and now a shipwreck ... he gets bit by a poisonous snake! Surely he was thinking ... "what next?"

But here is where the good things already are working out. The natives of the island Malta, Luke says, are unusually kind. They aren't just sort of kind, they don't just offer a nice welcome ... they are *unusually* kind.

We will soon be looking at the Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, an all-church initiative that will help us examine how *we* are doing the things *all* churches do, but how we might step it up a notch.

The very first of those practices is hospitality. Not just plain old, run-of-the-mill hospitality, but *radical* hospitality. A Jesus kind of hospitality. In other words, how do we show *unusual* kindness, like the island natives at Malta?

The thing is, the natives of Malta, had *some* sense of the divine because they immediately thought Paul must be a murderer and that the divine Judge was condemning him with a snakebite. He would surely drop dead any minute. In their ancient, primitive world, bad things happened to bad people.

And when Paul did not die, they turned it around to believe he was a god. They believed in something bigger and more powerful than themselves ... but they definitely believed in more than one god. They did not know the one, true God and certainly did not know about Jesus, the risen Lord.

So, we are told that a man who was the chief of the natives, or the head person ... named Publius ... showed Paul and Luke that radical hospitality by inviting them to come and stay in his own home. He could have helped them set up a tent, or might have even told them they were on their own; he could have told them to leave, but instead, he invited them to his house.

Luke says he put them up in fine style for the next 3 days ... probably helping them work out where they were going to stay until the storms passed and they could figure out the next plan for continuing their journey to Rome.

Publius had a father who was sick with a high fever. Luke tells us that Paul laid hands on him and prayed. Knowing Paul as we have come to know him as a servant and messenger of Jesus Christ, he surely prayed in the name of Jesus. The man was healed.

Here we find Paul showing the good people of Malta that he was not a god ... it was the one, true God working through him, in the name of Jesus, who was the healer.

And not only was this one man healed, but Luke says *everyone* on the island who was sick came and got healed!

What a classic example of God working everything for good! Paul had warned the captain and sailors that setting sail at the time they did could cost them their lives because of the winter storms that were bound to happen, and they would not listen. They ended up going through a terrible period of horrific winds and storms, losing cargo ... and their appetites along with everything else ... finally being shipwrecked in the middle of the sea, off a small island.

But look at all the good that came from that unfortunate incident! Paul had more opportunity to serve others and to tell them about God's love and healing. He could tell them the good news about the gift of God ... Jesus, God's Son.

But it was also an opportunity for those islanders to show their grace and hospitality ... and for Paul and Luke to be blessed by their unusual kindness.

And what about all the sailors who were there witnessing? Those who would have just as soon thrown Paul and all the prisoners overboard to drown? Surely they too, witnessed the love and power of God's active, gracious Holy Spirit.

Paul certainly had first hand experience when he wrote in his letter to the church in Rome that God works all things together for God!

How have you experienced this redeeming grace of God in your life? In your worst moments, in times of tragedy and fear, in times of grief and pain ... it may be very hard to fathom that anything good could come from it.

But the promise we have is that God can use anything in our lives and can bring good out of it. Does that mean God turns the situation around and makes it to not be happening? Does the loss of a job suddenly change and you get to keep that job? It doesn't usually work that way, does it?

But there will be something good in that situation. We can trust that God is in this with us. It's kind of like praying 'not my will, Father, but yours.' We have to be open to seeing into God's vision for us. What might not seem so great, according to our own plan, could end up being far better, according to God's plan for us.

This isn't a "Pollyanna" view of life. This isn't even an "every cloud has a silver lining" kind of philosophy either.

This is a faithful, obedient trust in the Lord, by God's own people, who can count on Him to keep his promise that even in those shipwrecked moments of our lives, God is with us and can use that awful situation for good. We can't always see it happening immediately.

And sometimes we may never realize just how it did happen. Maybe the good came for someone else. Our job is to trust in God who is always faithful to us, who ultimately has our back, no matter what.

We know God's presence with us because of the Holy Spirit, which is the great gift given to the Church, God's gift that empowers us to keep the faith, to believe in what we cannot see, to continue the ministry that Jesus began, to spread the good news of redemption to all, to tell of God's amazing grace and love for the world.

We know that, with the Holy Spirit, anything can happen. It already has, and it will continue throughout our journey of life ... and beyond.

Thanks be to God!

© Copyright 2012. All Rights Reserved.