

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

18th Sunday after Pentecost

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Text: Romans 8:24-30

Title: “Serving from the Heart: Experience”

This morning we conclude the series on “Serving from the Heart”. We’ve been working through an acronym: STRIDE--S for Spiritual Gifts; T for Talent; R for resources; I for individuality; D for dreams. This morning we finish with “Experiences”. The idea is that when we are using our spiritual gifts in meaningful ways, we reach our STRIDE. That is, we find our niche and discover that God has given us what is needed in order to serve from the heart, which is a gift in and of itself.

Sometimes, though, that stride can be thwarted. When I was serving as pastor of St. Luke’s in Essexville, I learned the name of a boy named Nathan Weidner. His father wrote that

“Nathan was always bringing home children that had parents that abused them, that were hungry, or were in some sad way in need of some kindness in their life. He brought them home with him where he knew there was kindness and a warm meal” – Jack Weidner

But Nathan’s life was short. He died in a tragic Moped accident. He was one of those sensitive personalities that expresses itself in caring for other people and his life was prematurely ended by that accident.

We hear stories like this all the time, stories when the unexpected happens. Sometimes the unexpected or unwanted isn’t quite so traumatic. It might be the need for an unexpected move due to job changes. Or maybe it’s an illness we didn’t see coming. Or it could be divorce happens.

The other side to this is that sometimes the unexpected is positive. It might be an unexpected promotion, maybe a special recognition of some kind. Might be a joy we experience through a child or grandchild or even a friend, something we had no idea was coming. We have experiences both good and bad throughout our lives. The good is easy to live through and celebrate and enjoy, but the troublesome or traumatic are a different story. What do we do with the hard stuff?

I think it’s fair to say that Paul was the church’s most powerful apostle. If you are in a spiritual gifts class and did your homework you know that an apostle is someone who is sent on behalf of Christ to share the good news of God’s grace and love in Jesus, to tell the world that God’s kingdom is at hand and all are invited to be part of that kingdom. If it hadn’t been for Paul, Christianity may have faded into history as just another of the world’s small religious sects.

But because of Paul's witness and work, the Spirit moved the world, changed the world and even eventually brought an empire that cruelly persecuted Christ followers like Paul to embrace Christ.

But none of that came easily. Throughout his ministry Paul was repeatedly imprisoned and beaten. Sometimes he was ignored. And sometimes he was incredibly successful in planting the love of God in Jesus in the hearts and minds of those with whom he served. Churches sprung up in Corinth and Thessalonica and Philippi and Ephesus and eventually Rome itself as a result of his work.

So when Paul proclaims in his letter to the Roman congregation that, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose", he writes out of experiences with traumatic imprisonments and shipwrecks and beatings as well as the triumphant joy of those who came to know and love Jesus as a result of his preaching and work. And when we hear from Paul's heart,

For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience,

It's not some easy platitude offered to suffering people when the one writing is safe and secure and protected, well fed, without a care in the world. No, when Paul speaks of hoping for that which is not seen, he speaks with the authority of a person who has some tough experiences under his belt. He speaks as someone who without question demonstrates his hope in the One to whom he had given his life. No one can question Paul's integrity when it comes to hope. His life was a demonstration of powerful hope in the grace and love of God for the world through Jesus Christ.

So when he calls the Roman congregation to have hope, and when he proclaims to that same congregation that all things work together for those who love God, they listen. This call to hope and conviction that God can use all things for good will become especially vital when the Roman Emperor Nero begins cruelly persecuting Christians in the decades to come. They will no doubt wonder—as we often do when unexpected and traumatic experiences come, where is the good? Was Paul out of his mind? Some experiences in life appear to have no good in them at all. Certainly, we know of--or have experienced ourselves--things in our lives that do not appear to have any redeeming qualities, at least when we are in the midst of experiencing them.

And yet Paul knows Jesus' story. Paul knows of the cross. Paul knows of resurrection. Paul knows of God's love in Jesus that has not been buried in a tomb but continues to live and move through the Spirit. Just a few verses later he writes:

³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

"For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height,

nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. That is Paul's conviction born out of experiences both good and bad, born out of his own experience with the risen Christ and God's love that cannot be killed and buried but rather is alive and moving through the Spirit in the world.

When Nathan Weidner died, his mother and father, established a foundation in their son's name. The foundation's website says, "The Nathan Weidner Foundation was formed to continue his efforts to help those in need: the economically disadvantaged, abused, and neglected children of Bay County." You may have heard of "The Nathan Weidner Children's Advocacy Center". That center was established to care for children who suffer abuse. Previous to the establishment of the center, children who suffered abuse were being traumatized over and over again because they had to be interviewed several times by the various professionals involved in prosecuting the case. The advocacy center eliminated the repetition by having one trained person interview the child in a safe, child-friendly environment with law enforcement officials watching the interview from behind one-way mirrors and asking questions through the interviewer. It meant only one interview for the child. It didn't eliminate the trauma but did reduce it.

Maybe you've heard the name Malala Yousafzai? Malala as you may know is only 17 years old and was co-awarded the Nobel Peace Prize last week. As a younger teenager in Pakistan, the Taliban took over the region in which she lived and immediately banned DVDs, dancing and closed all girls' schools. She took to blogging and proclaiming how dare the Taliban eliminate her and other females' right to an education. You probably know the story. She was shot on her way home one day by Taliban.

She survived and has been courageously defying those who would stifle the right of any girl to have an education.

"all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purposes."

Of course, most of us will not have such traumatic experiences to overcome. Ours may be more like something one of the authors of the study group material experienced.

Several years ago, Carol's husband, Jim, was transferred to Kansas City from Chicago. Carol had lived in Chicago all her life. She held the position of Director of Community Life at her home church, which meant she was responsible for the ministries that helped connect people to the life of the church. She determined her new 'job' would be to help her family make the transition to their new home, job, and schools—she would take a sabbatical from church work until their lives were settled.

One Sunday after the move to Kansas City, as Carol sat in the sanctuary at the Church of the Resurrection, Pastor Adam Hamilton gave a sermon on the Parable of the Talents, relating it to our choice to either use or bury our God-given spiritual gifts. Carol felt the Holy Spirit

urging her to put her own gifts to work in this new setting. Since her background was in equipping ministries, especially helping people discover and use their God-given gifts and talents, maybe there was a place for her to serve the church, and perhaps she needed to speak with Adam. However, she knew that he was always surrounded after the service and she wasn't really sure it was the right time to step back into a ministry. So she prayed, "Lord, if this is your will, help me connect with Adam." Amazingly, as Carol left the sanctuary, there stood Adam, momentarily alone.

She approached him, and Adam connected Carol with the Director of Discipleship at the church. She soon discovered that a member of the church staff had been praying for someone to help them develop a spiritual gifts ministry program. Once the connection was made, Carol helped for a team to start the gifts ministry. God used Carol's life circumstances to serve God's purposes. (Pp. 92-93, Serving from the Heart)

"...all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purposes."

Just living our lives brings experiences that can be used for good. What experiences do you have? How might those experiences be used to glorify God and serve others? Are there ways in which the Spirit is nudging you to use them? Consider acting on them this morning. Consider the ways in which God may be calling you to use your spiritual gifts, talents, resources, individuality, dreams and finally your experiences to be part of building God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Because when we are part of God's greater purpose we find life and love and joy that are simply beyond our own power to achieve on our own. When we allow God to use our experiences we find as our next hymn prays...

Freshness of the morning, newness of each night,
You are still creating endless love and light.
This we see, as shadows part, many gifts from one great heart.

Many gifts, one Spirit, one love known in many ways.
In our difference is blessing, from diversity we praise
One Giver, one Lord, one Spirit, one Word
Known in many ways, hallowing our days.
For the Giver, for the gifts, praise, praise, praise!