

**SERMON TITLE-** "A Parable"

**TEXT-** Romans 8:18-28

**PREACHED AT-** Neighbourhood Church

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Today was to be the first Sunday of our Fall sermon series. Actually it was to be last week . . . but that was also to have been the day we truly were back home at our own church building.

Alas, we were not- but today we are. Because of that and because we are clearly here while construction is still underway it occurred to me that there is another sermon that fits the situation very well. In fact, I think it is an opportunity to preach while we are going through a living parable of the Kingdom of God.

This is one of those pivotal passages of the NT- one that I have preached on several times but as I prepared for this week it had a special significance.

It begins-

**I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. Romans 8:18**

**The Scenario**

As you look around yourself today you are seeing a half completed building. Floors without carpets, rooms without door, light switches with nothing in them, sidewalks without concrete, and so on.

We are in a building under construction.

But it is our building and for several reasons it is where we are meeting now and from now on.

And so it is that when we are tempted to look around at the incompleated state of affairs- we are also here with a sense of optimism and even joy. It may not be as slick as Oliver Woods, where we spend the last 2 months, but it is ours and with a little help we can look past the "sufferings" and "see" the glory of what we are hoping for.

We could spend a little time on this exercise but that isn't all that struck me as I reflected on our situation. What I see is a parable for a Kingdom principle.

What we are living through here at the church, occupying space under construction, has a deep parallel to how Kingdom people understand life on earth.

This is what Paul goes on to explain in the section that follows-

**The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. Romans 8:19**

**The Parable**

What Paul explains is- living in chaos as we are, in expectation of something better to come is what the Kingdom of God is all about. This has several parts-

**i. We Are The Sons Of God To Be Revealed**

Using this our building as the parable means that you and I are the walls without doors, sidewalks without concrete, light boxes without lights.

In some ways that may not be a very flattering picture but we probably don't have to think too long without realizing that it is quite realistic.

The usual charge against Christians is that they are not any better than anyone else. I hope that isn't actually true but there are reasons why one would be justified in

saying that.

This week I watched an old special on Johnny Cash. At one level his life was a lot worse than that of an average person. He had very big problems with drugs and alcohol. These problems were very public.

On the other hand he was a very visible and outspoken Christian. He was an easy target for the charge that if his actual life is the standard of his faith- there is a great deal to be skeptical about. Do all those fine words and songs really mean anything at all?

Because Cash was so public he is of course an easy target but while most of our lives are far less dramatic few of us would have grounds for similar charges.

We all know that if the true facts of our lives and sins were revealed, we too would be easy targets for the accusation that there is a disconnect between our best intentions and the reality of our actions.

We are, far too often, sidewalks without concrete, rooms without doors and electrical boxes without switches.

I like the parable of our incomplete building because alongside of the fact that we see hole in walls without doors, we also see the openings where doors are supposed to be and we also see places where fully functioning doors are in place.

In other words, while there is a great deal that is incomplete and missing- looking around, we also have a vision of how things are supposed to be when the job is done.

And when we see things the way they are supposed to be we are seeing the future.

Paul explains further-

**For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.**

**Romans 8:20-21**

## **ii. Deconstruction Is Necessary Because Things Aren't Working**

There have been more than a few times when those of us working at the church have been tempted to wish for the old days before the renovation began. We had nice offices. Our phones worked. The noise and distraction of construction was not going on all around us. Compared to the dirt we have lived in we were in a beautiful clean building.

So why did we subject ourselves to this chaos?

The answer isn't hard to recall. We undertook this project because, while there were a number of things in the old building that we long for now- things as they had been were not working any more.

Specifically, in this case, the old building had become too small. There is no way to fix something that is too small without tearing down walls and expanding the foundations.

There are some changes that can be made with a bucket of paint and a few minor changes- but you can't make new space with a new coat of paint. New space requires tearing down walls and expanding.

Paint can make a room look bigger but that's all.

That is why we subjected ourselves to the chaos that you see around yourself.

Paul reminds us that God has a new plan because things as they exist in the world we live in have a big problem- a problem that can't be fixed with a coat of paint and a few

minor carpentry skills.

We are living in a world that is simultaneously in a state of deconstruction and reconstruction.

And what is the problem with the world? This is a very important question because unless we understand this we are very justified in our frustration with the chaos of what we see around us.

If we didn't have a very good reason to undertake these changes at the church then the chaos we are having to endure is to no good end.

At the church we understand the need for our reno but why is the world in the state it is in?

### iii. The Problem Is Death And Decay

Paul does not beat around the bushes here. He does not point out all kinds of serious things that are not the essence of the problem.

He could have mentioned-

- sickness
- broken relationships
- poverty
- war

These are things that we recognize as huge problems and any person who had answers to any one of them would be recognized as a saviour.

But Paul goes past all of them and directly to the core of the problem- it is the fact that the world as we know it is **“in bondage to decay.”** In other words, we are all going to die.

That defines the problem in its ultimate category. No matter how many other fixes you bring to bear there is no escaping that reality and it is something that is at the heart of our deepest quests and most inescapable despair.

The search for the secret to extending life is both a practical and a mythical quest.

The sadness that no matter how hard we work at getting things fixed up- in the end it all turns to dust is the theme of songs, poems and stories for as long as they have been recorded.

The great Biblical poem that describes this is the Book of Ecclesiastes-

**Then I thought in my heart, "The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?" I said in my heart, "This too is meaningless."**

**For the wise man, like the fool, will not be long remembered; in days to come both will be forgotten. Like the fool, the wise man too must die!**

**So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Ecclesiastes 2:15-17**

Ironically the knowledge that we are all going to die in the end even leads some people to commit suicide.

But death is the inescapable burden under which all creation is in bondage.

And Paul continues-

**We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Romans 8:22**

What Paul observes is that it is not only people who groan under the burden of

death but all creation. In this he is probably referring to other life forms because he observes that life clings to life and those beings with consciousness struggle to hand onto life with great pathos.

And even God's people, whose hope extends beyond this, also are part of this groaning of creation-

**Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. Romans 8:23**

This is a powerful observation that Kingdom people must not forget. We, with the rest of creation cling to the life we know and understand. Kingdom people have a hope of life beyond this one- but we still grieve with the rest of creation that it is temporal.

A verse that I use at funerals is 1 Timothy 4:13

**Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. 1 Timothy 4:13**

It is so important not to think that somehow we don't grieve when we contemplate our own mortality or that of those we love. Of course we do.

But as Paul elaborates, there is more- we have a hope!

**For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. Romans 8:24-25**

**We Live In Hope**

And there Paul nails what our hope is- "**the redemption of our bodies**". There will be a day when we are free from living under the bondage to decay and death and will be redeemed- in our bodies.

That is a hope that we live with and do not yet have. We will indeed all die- that there is no escaping. We don't rail against this fact- we live patiently with it but not with a sense of finality.

Coming back to our renovation the same principle holds. We are living with the fact that the church is under construction. There is nothing to be gained by frustration with this fact- even if at times we groan under the inconvenience of it all. The state of the church, as we see it, is what we live with.

We make the best of what we have within the reality of what is.

This is a great lesson for me, and I suspect for most people. There is something that feels peculiarly satisfying in a bitter complaint but there is a real danger in a complaint becoming a way of living.

When this happens it begins to destroy us from the inside out.

How do you get work done when there are distractions and messes all around you? It's tough but you have to do it. We note the frustration. We don't pretend that everything is OK.

And then we get back to work doing the best we can under the circumstances.

But there is one more point that struck me as I reflected on our renovation as a parable of the Kingdom.

We live in a chaotic world.

We live with a hope.

We accept the fact that we don't have the completion.  
BUT, we don't accept that the chaos and incompleteness are the last word- even as we live with them.

What does that mean?

### **We Strive To Set Things Right**

We live in a decaying world. That is a Biblical fact.

The world won't stop decaying. That is an observational fact.

But we are people of the Kingdom of God and we live with the hope of the Kingdom driving us from the inside out.

This has all kinds of implications for the people of God. Some of them are-

#### **1. We Continuously Work For Restoration**

The world may be a decaying place but God's people have been given the assignment to work for restoration.

This may seem like a peculiar paradox. We live with the knowledge that everything is going to die anyway. We have no hope that the world is going to improve in any ultimate sense- and yet we have been given the command to bring light and salt to a dark and decaying world.

It is a peculiar thing because in many cases it is the people who are the most concerned with the souls of people who end up doing the most for their physical concerns.

Who has been working most notably on the mean streets of Vancouver for decades? The Union Gospel Mission with its red neon sign on its door, Jesus Saves.

Why wouldn't we just ask people to accept Jesus and walk away? Some do- but speaking as one whose father dragged him to the mission as a child, those who are concerned for the souls of people, end up being the ones who are looking after the bodies of those who are down and out.

Why is this? Because as Kingdom people we have the assignment to work for the restoration of the world we are living in.

#### **2. We Continuously Pray For Healing**

We know that the end of the body is the grave. We know that sickness is a fact of life and that God's people are not told that they have some easy exit plan from the diseases that plague humanity.

And yet, as Kingdom people we are told to pray for those who are sick. We don't merely call the doctors and pharmacists. We also call on the Great Physician when we, and those around us are sick. We pray for healing.

And there is one more important principle-

#### **3. We Don't Use Fallenness As An Excuse**

There is a huge temptation that faces all of us when we see the overwhelming challenge of personally being works in progress.

The temptation is to allow ourselves and easy out when we see our own failures.

Oh well, no one can expect us to be perfect. Why King David had his failures and still God loved him?

One of the things that made Johnny Cash so popular is the fact that his failures were so visible. People could see his passion to do right in his music and yet he stumbled

in dramatic ways.

That is what makes Johnny Cash and King David very sympathetic characters for all of us.

But along side of that we only too easily use it as an excuse for our fallen behaviour.

Country music is full of the message of redemption and depravity and leads to the misuse of the song Amazing Grace. Rather than being a prod to get people to change their ways- that amazing grace is often, implicitly taken as a placebo for the failures within our characters.

This is a terrible misuse of the principle of grace.

Instead, the parable of our building tells us that while we do live in an incomplete project- we work diligently to get things right as quickly as is possible.

The reality is, that at this moment there are no bathrooms in this part of the building- but that is not OK. That is something that we need to address as quickly as possible. We need bathrooms.

At this moment the sidewalks are not completed but that is not OK. We are going to work to get those sidewalks completed.

In our daily lives- we are NOT going to say, “Oh well, I guess I’m just a man.” To quote Red Green.

The incompleteness of what we see around us means that we have a job to do.

Now this isn’t easy and when you have lived in chaos for a long time- and when it seems that progress has stalled and even begun to regress- we get very discouraged.

And so it is that Paul gives us to of the most poignant promises in the Bible- in the context of the incompleteness of the renovation we are involved with.

**In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. Romans 8:26-27**

### **Divine Words To Express Our Frustration**

Are you ever completely bottled up inside? Even people with a way with words can’t express the true frustration of it all so Paul describes the groaning of the soul.

We have Grayson as part of our household. He is a pre language being. He can’t tell us when he is tired or hungry or bored. All he can do is cry. Now with time we begin to distinguish the sound of the cries.

That is a very shallow but appropriate version of what the Holy Spirit does for God’s people. It is shallow because unlike our attempts to understand Grayson- the Holy Spirit actually does know exactly what the cry of our heart is. And He takes that cry to the throne of God.

And what is our assignment in this? It is not to sit there stoically when we are wounded and frustrated by the endless decay of the world we are living in. No, our job is to get it out of ourselves- even and especially if it is only a groan.

The promise has carried many a child of God.

And Paul gives us another great treasure-

**And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28**

**The Great Comfort**

This is the great comfort of the Scriptures- God has a way of turning our disasters into treasures.

This is does not say, as some have concluded that every disaster is what God wants for us. No, what is acknowledges is that there are disasters that happen- and if we come to grips with the fact that this is the way it is in a decaying world- and that God has a promise of reconstruction- even the disaster will be turned into treasures.

That is an incredible promise.