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Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

1 Kings 3:5-12

Psalms 119:129-136

Romans 8:26-39

July 26, 2026

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

On my recent trip to Scotland I found myself hiking with a newfound friend, a gentleman in his later 70's who had been hiking the hills of western Scotland his entire life. Every hill and every cliff, every bog and every open expanse held a story. An animal he had tracked, a dog he had lost, a friend he had known. And so over the course of 4 hours we walked those same hills tracing his life one step at a time. Sometimes, we walked in silence...taking in the land, the smells, the sounds. And at other times, he would quietly share memories.

He knew I was a priest and at first those memories were cautious. Just enough to make conversation. But then, he turned to me as we stopped on this one hill that overlooked the sea. And he asked...how can I believe in a God who would let bad things happen?

The pain in his voice was palpable. His expression hid nothing. Exhaustion. Grief. Anger.

So, I asked him to tell me more. What was the story behind his question?

And you might say that in that moment the flood gates opened. One story after another of loved ones who died too early, parents and siblings and friends. As a young man, he had to navigate the kind of grief and loss that no young person (or older person for that matter) should ever have to experience.

He had been carrying that grief for a lifetime. And he had been carrying his plea to God...why did you let these things happen? This gentle kind soul had been at a breaking point for far too long. A point of extended crisis, a deep hurting of the heart, still feeling waves of despair that brought him to tears.

What was I supposed to say? Because we all know this to be true...in moments when our pain is rising up from the depths of our souls, words can be little comfort. At the same time, he was longing to hear words that reassured him, that gave him direction at his point of breaking.

And when I first read our text from Romans, I thought of his question. I also thought that Paul's words as a response weren't very helpful. Especially verse 28, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God..." I think if I had said those words to my friend in that moment he might have yelled at me.

This pain is going to work for good? You've got to be kidding me!

Because here's the problem...

The theology of that one statement, when used out of context, is all wrong.

Let's just say we believe that all things work together for good for those who love God. Does that mean there is something wrong with your faith if things aren't working for good? Does this verse imply that the opposite is also true, that there are things that don't work for good if your love of God is faltering? And why do you have to experience pain in the first place? Can't God do something about it before things get really bad?

Maybe you have wrestled with these questions yourself. I know I have.

These are age old theological questions, the kind of questions that can make or break a person's faith. They can bring us closer to God or they can push us so far away we may not know how to get back to a place of trusting God. This was where I found my friend on that hillside in Scotland.

It's important that we name how difficult breaking points can be, especially when it comes to our relationship with God in times of suffering. Because if we don't acknowledge the difficulty, we are ignoring an extremely important faith experience that so many of us have had.

I believe Paul understood this on a very personal level. I want you to notice that even before he says that God will work for good in all things he names something else that is an essential foundation for our ability to rely on God in times of suffering.

And...the first thing Paul names has nothing to do with the quality of our faith. He also doesn't explain away or minimize pain. He doesn't just casually point us back to God.

Instead, he emphasizes that the Spirit will help us and when there are no words that can comfort us, when there are no words that we can even pray, the Spirit simply sighs on our behalf. The Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. It's a sigh that surrounds our hearts and holds us when we can't hold ourselves.

So before there are any words about what we believe or how we should believe, there is simply the act of compassion.

The breath of God surrounding us when we can't breathe ourselves. A comfort we can't even comprehend but is there with us nonetheless. A breath, a Spirit, that surrounds us with love until we can begin to breathe again on our own.

The second thing Paul tells us is that there is absolutely nothing that can separate us from this Spirit. Not hardship. Not distress. Not persecution. Not famine. Not nakedness. Not peril. In other words, there is no breaking point too great for God.

Paul believes this in the depths of his soul. In fact, he makes a very bold statement. He proclaims in verse 38, "I am convinced." I believe this. I know this in my bones and I so

desperately want you to believe it too. I want you to feel it and know it in your soul when you are at your breaking point. And if you can't believe my words, just let God's breath cover you in compassion and goodness. And rest there for a while. You may not believe just yet that all things work together for good. That's OK. Rest and give the Spirit time to mend your soul.

As I stood there with my new friend on that hillside overlooking the sea, I fumbled for words. I'm not as eloquent as Paul but what I did tell him was my own conviction...

I am convinced that there is nothing bad in this world that God gives us. There is no pain that God wants us to experience. God weeps when we weep. God grieves when we grieve. And when we can't feel God carrying us or when we doubt that God hears our prayers, that's when God gives us one another. To walk alongside one another in compassion and goodness and love. To help carry our burdens and to hold us through our suffering.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 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.

Closing Prayer from the Iona Community

May the mind of God,
ever wiser than our minds,
search us deeply
and open us to the truths
that make for our healing.

May the ears of God
ever open to our prayers,
listen for us deeply
and hear, beneath our words,
our honest yearnings.

May the heart of God,
ever filled with costly love,
cherish us deeply,
mending any brokenness
and affirming our worth.

May God keep us company this day and bring us joy in our tomorrows. Amen.¹

¹ The Iona Community. *Iona Abbey Worship Book*. Rev. ed., Wild Goose Publications, 2017. p.118