

February 8, 2015  
Falcon Heights Church, UCC  
Falcon Heights, MN  
The Rev. Anne Swallow Gillis

History Sunday  
Epiphany 5, Year B  
Romans 8: 26-28

### MESSAGE FOR ALL AGES - HISTORY SUNDAY

*Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.... We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to (God's) purpose. (Romans 8)*

We have just heard some words from a letter, written by one of the early ministers and teachers in the church. After Jesus died, Paul traveled around near where Jesus lived, spreading the good news that the spirit of Jesus was still alive, bringing new life inside people and within communities. He started a lot of churches; then he would write letters to them, encouraging them. His church in Rome was having a hard time, and he wrote these words: "Even when you don't know what to pray for, God's spirit prays inside of you." And, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God."

Now that first part makes sense for me. I like this idea that the Spirit is inside, deeply sighing for me, when I need help. But that second part is a little more confusing. *All things work together for good.* You mean if something bad happens in my life, it's a good thing? My dog dies, or my dad gets sick or I lose my job or a friend is mean to me, that is working together for good? Probably most of us have had this verse, or something like it, offered to us by a well-meaning person when we were in a crisis. Something terrible has happened in our lives, in our family or in our church, and someone is trying to console us. *All things work together for good*, they remind us. Their intentions are well-meaning; they are trying to help in a situation where a bad thing has happened to a good or innocent person. *It's meant to be.... God doesn't give you more than you can handle...*

But it gets me thinking about what kind of God this might be. A God who sits at a giant control panel in the sky, like a big computer, and planning awful things to happen in our lives. "Here, let me send an earthquake, or make someone sick, or I'll start a war over here," we imagine God thinking to Godself. I don't think this is true. But we live in an imperfect world, where mistakes and disasters happen and people hurt each other. Some are big and some are small. How do we cope with this reality?

Many years ago, when I was a young mom, I was standing by our kitchen sink preparing dinner. "Itchy is dead!" The sudden cry of anguish escalated as

my young son hurtled down the hall. I quickly turned from the sink as Nicholas burst into the kitchen. Tears streaming down his cheeks, he could hardly speak.

“Nicholas, what’s wrong?” I implored with mounting panic.

“Mom! Itchy is dead!” Unable to identify the deceased, I hesitated. Nicholas moaned, “My goldfish, Mom!”

Then I remembered. A hot afternoon at the school carnival a few weeks before. Nicholas’ triumphant face as he presented me with the water-filled plastic bag containing a tiny goldfish. “Look what I won! I’ve named him Itchy!” Remembering the survival rate of goldfish from my own childhood. Shaking my head in resignation. Now, the inevitable had happened and my five-year-old child was inconsolable.

“Oh, sweetheart,” I sighed, circling my arms around him. He continued to sob hysterically. Working at the time as a hospital chaplain who specialized in helping people deal with loss, I was on familiar ground. But as my own child continued to wail, I sensed a growing impatience within me. It was hard to listen to him cry. I wanted to laugh out loud and protest, “It’s just a fish!”

Somehow I stopped myself. I flashed on the way loss is often minimized. “Stop your belly-aching....this isn’t a big deal!” “It’s just a dog; just an early pregnancy that wasn’t to be; just another pastor leaving....not such a big deal,” people will often say. These words discredit the sadness, anger and confusion people experience when something or someone precious disappears. Yet, here I felt powerless. My son was grief-stricken! Like any good parent, I wanted to fix this.

“We can get you another one” leapt to my lips. Like, you can get a *new* dog, get pregnant again, get a new pastor. But somehow I held the words back, knowing that few people are consoled by the idea of getting a replacement when a pet or human loved one dies or someone important leaves.

Nicholas’ sobbing was more muffled now. I knelt down beside him, but I was in no mood to pray. I was feeling a bit mad at God and wondered why children have to face disappointment and hurt. Some people feel terribly angry and abandoned by God in times of loss. “Why did God let her die?” “Why does God let him suffer so?” “Why did God let our church get into such big fights?” These are raw, tough questions that push against my understanding of fairness, the purposes of life, and of Mystery itself.

In that moment on our kitchen floor, I wondered if God sometimes feels like this, like a parent holding a hurting child. Does God yearn to replace the fish and make it all better? “Where are you, God? What are you doing?” I have demanded. Yet, as I embraced my son, I remembered the ways God has held

me during periods of chaos and grief. I remembered when I have felt God holding me as other humans have listened to my frustrations or my sorrows. I remembered people who have been like the Spirit, simply quietly groaning with me with sighs too deep for words. I realized that this is how the good starts to come back into our lives.

Snuffling quietly now, Nicholas asked if we could bury Itchy. We carefully scooped the floating carcass out of the fishbowl and put it in the refrigerator so we could bury it the backyard in the morning. I sensed that my son was already starting his grief work. Sermonizing or attempts to distract him from his pain were not required. He had needed my quiet listening presence and compassion. He went to blow his nose. I returned to the dishes in the sink, marveling at God's unfathomable tenderness and loving restraint as Parent of us all.

Now worst things have happened than a fish dying in our family. But I realized that this instance might give me a good chance to practice working these biblical principles. The Spirit of God is praying for you, I reminded myself. And God is working all things for good, even this! It's like starting with the small stuff if you are trying to see how God is working all things together for good. And we are partners in making this good happen....in our presence, in our listening, in our quiet groaning for one another. Start with the small stuff and practice. God is truly working all things together for good. We get to be partners with God in this healing process. Thanks be to God. Amen.