

St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church sermon for the eighth
Sunday after Pentecost 2020: "All things work together for good"

Surely you've heard of the guy who spent forty years robbing churches all around the world. He would break in and steal money out of the vault, the silver candlesticks and Communion vessels, even precious works of sacred art. When he was finally caught, his defense was quite simple. "When I was a kid in church, they taught me that no one can serve two masters," he said. "I'm just freeing all of these churches from Mammon so they can serve God!"

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

This is probably one of the most misused sentences in all of the Bible. It is used to explain away things that really shouldn't be explained away.

Ominous medical diagnosis? God must just be testing you!

Loved one who died an untimely death? God must have really loved her and wanted to call her home!

All those people who suffered and died to win us freedoms and prosperity we now enjoy? God used them as an example of faithfulness and courage for us!

I cannot tell you how many times I have heard well-meaning people of faith make statements like these. And they often use that famous sentence we just read from Romans to back it up: We

know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

Trouble is, statements like these are both bad theology and completely fail to honor what people sometimes feel when they're experiencing the darker side of life. Sometimes it's not obvious at all how things are working together for good, and a simplistic attempt at explaining it only makes matters worse.

No, I don't believe that this sentence was meant to be used to explain away difficult things.

I do, however, believe that it is an invitation to prayer. Specifically, it is an invitation to two kinds of prayer.

The first is a prayer of inquiry. This sentence invites us to ask God, at all times, how the circumstances around us are working together for good.

And it's perfectly ok to accompany this prayer with anger and frustration if that's what we're feeling. If you ever worry whether it's ok to shake your fist at God and scream "what on earth are you up to?!", just read the Psalms. You're in good company.

But then, after the fist shaking and screaming if necessary, we can go back to the key question. How are things working together for good here? How is the coronavirus pandemic working for our

good? How is the tension in our communities working for our good?

Now, God may sometimes provide a clear, discernable answer in response to a prayer like this, but that's not actually the main point. The main point is that saying a prayer like this changes us. It implants the question in our minds. Once the question is there, we look at the world around us through a different lens. We start searching for the answer in the events and words, big and small, that swirl around us. And, being in that searching state, we are far more likely to happen upon a useful answer.

The second prayer invited by the passage is one of supplication. Rather than asking God how circumstances are working together for good, we can *ask* that they work together for good.

Please turn this trial into strength.

Please use this conflict to create progress.

Please don't let this death be in vain.

Again, I never discount the possibility that God will answer such a prayer with a plain old miracle, but again, I don't believe that's the main point. Just like with the prayer of inquiry, this prayer changes us.

See, I think we too often sell ourselves short. God is the infinite, the omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. Jesus may be the fullest expression of that in human form, but all of us are little divine beings, invited by God to assist in the salvation and re-creation of the universe.

When we pray for God to use things to work together for good, a subtle but incredibly powerful shift happens in us. With this idea implanted in our heads, we begin to look for every opportunity help bring it to fruition. We speak and act in ways that make things work together for good, even if initially those things seem scary or difficult and in no way good. In other words, this prayer of supplication can be the first step in us living more deeply into our calling to be the voice and hands of Christ in the world.

Finally, we must read this beautiful sentence in context for it to make sense. Depending on what things we're talking about, "all things work together for good" can sound downright dismissive. I mean seriously, did slavery or the holocaust work together for good for those who love God? I think there are many, both living and dead, who would very much question that.

But, if we read the last two verses of the eighth chapter of Romans, we get more of a sense of what this really might mean. *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.*

Paul is not suggesting for a second that we will not face troubles and hardships. Those who love God will still face death, powers, rulers, and just about anything else creation can dish up. But, Paul promises, none of those things has nearly enough strength to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Perhaps the best translation of the sentence with which we began today is: “We know that all things work together for love for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”

The highest good is love, specifically divine love. It is the sure and certain knowledge that everything is ok, even when it isn't.

So no, not everything works together for good in the sense that everything turns out roses outwardly for those who love God. But everything does work together for divine love.

So, my friends, as you face whatever this week may hold, try holding it in light of this famous passage from Romans. Ask God in prayer how everything has been working together for good. Ask then then that it *will* work together for good. And finally, remember that even if nothing seems good in the earthly sense, nothing, truly nothing, can separate you from God's heavenly love, and that is the greatest good of all.