

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, Epistle, Year A

SUBJECTS OF HOPE

Romans 8:12-25

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

12 So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— 13for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. 14For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. 15For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ 16it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. 19For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; 20for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; 23and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. 24For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? 25But if we hope for

what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

DIAGNOSIS: Subjected to the Flesh

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Suffering, Futility and Decay: Living in the Flesh

Suffering, says Paul, is a fact a life—at least as long as we live in the flesh. (Here “flesh” means, at a minimum, our creaturely, contingent nature.) Just look at the whole creation around us. As beautifully photogenic as it is, look closer. Even it is suffering: “subject to futility” (v. 20) and in “bondage to decay” (v. 21). If the Roman congregation thought faith in Christ meant the instant end to all of that, they couldn’t be more mistaken. But that mistake is only the beginning of their problem, ours too.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Falling Back into Fear: Slaves to the Flesh

Far worse is the fact that they—we too—are tempted to give up on Christ and fall back out of fear into reliance on the flesh as their best hope for escape from this suffering. Here “flesh” refers to, at a minimum, those creaturely powers that we have been endowed with by God. They are impressive. But, unfortunately, the “flesh” refers to more than that! By so “falling back” on our flesh in fear—that is, by forsaking Christ and relying on it as our hope for our escape from this body of suffering—we are snubbing God as God and putting our flesh, our very selves, in God’s place. This is what Paul meant earlier when he said that “the flesh is hostile to God” (8:7). It usurps the place God is to have in our lives, thus replaying the “fall” described in Genesis 3 over and over again, a replay that Paul calls “the spirit of slavery” (v. 15).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Dying in the Flesh

And we should know where such “falling back” gets us? The stick

end of God's law. After all it is God who subjected the whole creation under us human creatures that we might be God's stewards of it, caring and tending it according to God's good and gracious will. Now that we have turned hostile toward the Creator, God—in defense of his creation—turns hostile towards us. That is, he subjects us to his law, to which we, because of our slavery to the flesh," will not—cannot—submit (cf. 8:7). The result being that the whole creation is like a sinking ship. Death is its end; and that suffering we talked about above is the lingering evidence of that end. For as the human creation fails, so fails the whole creation. That intimately connects all flesh.

PROGNOSIS: Subjects of Hope

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Christ Dying, but in Hope

But wait. It does not necessarily have to be that way. We are not only subjected to futility but subjects of hope! For God has done in Christ what the law weakened by the flesh could not do (cf. 8:3). The law could only condemn sin (hostility to God) in the flesh, thus sealing its bondage to sin and death. But God in Christ established the way to redeem sinful flesh from that God-imposed bondage in a most imaginative way. How? By sending Christ, the Son of God, to take on sinful flesh, confront the law's condemnation of it head on (suffering death on the cross), and, then, redeeming that flesh (set it free from that bondage) through his resurrection. In short, Paul says that Christ now makes it possible for slaves to sin, law, and death to become adopted as children of God and heirs of eternal life.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Reconsidering Suffering, but in Christ

Therefore, Paul urges those who are tempted to fall back on the flesh to reconsider that "fall." Instead, he urges them to

consider anew their sufferings in light of Christ's suffering. Of course, by "consider" (cf. v. 18) here he means "to put your hope in Christ and not in the flesh." In effect, Paul agrees that now all life is suffering, including the suffering of death. The question is the quality of that suffering. Is it suffering "in the flesh," which is hostile to God and leads to death? Or is it suffering "in the Spirit," in faith in Christ, which is at peace with God (8:6) and leads through death to life, from suffering to glory (v. 17)?

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Led and Living by the Spirit, Already

Such re-considering of our suffering (entrusting them to Christ) also means living and being led by the Spirit now, already, in the midst of this suffering, groaning creation. Faith in Christ is not "otherworldly." For whether we are in Christ (at peace with God) or in the flesh (hostile to God) we still remain intimately and inseparably related to the whole creation as "flesh," as God's creation. It is still true that as we, the human members of the creation, fair before God, so fairs the whole creation. We never cease to be God's designated human stewards of creation. For that reason Paul can say with confidence that the whole creation is our cheerleader (cf. v. 19): "For the creation [itself] waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God" (v. 19). And of what else does that "revealing" consist, but a redeemed humanity led by the Spirit for the sake of the care and redemption of all that God has made (cf. 21), both now, in this present time of patient suffering, and in glory, when the bondage to decay and futility will be no more.