

St. John's Lutheran Church
July 20, 2008

Now and Then"
Romans 8:12-25

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Most of you are aware that Debbie and I have been home from 3 weeks in Africa for almost two weeks now. But my head and heart continue to be full of the experience that we were able to have. The experience was a spiritual one on more than one level and as I return to my spiritual work here at the church the experience of Africa remains in the forefront of my thoughts and feelings.

Saturday morning, June 29th, found us in a passenger-filled four-wheel drive vehicle heading up the mountains into the village of Muhanga. On the way our driver, Esau, a native Tanzanian, and I were able to have a conversation. In our September presentation, you will meet Esau and the road, or lack of road that he was driving as we talked, and you will be amazed that he and I were able to talk as he drove, considering the added challenge that he was limited in English and I know almost no Swahili.

But talk we did and Esau was interested in talking with me about Christian faith in Tanzania and Christian faith in America. He shared that there were those people in Tanzania who believe that there is no God. And what the non-believers say, said Esau, is that the only reason why people believe in God in Tanzania is because life is so difficult. And they need a concept of God to rely on in the midst of their difficult life.

"But I am a believer," said Esau. "And one of the reasons I am a believer is because I know that there are believers like you in America. And life," he said, "in America is not difficult. I understand that people in America have all that they could want. And yet people in America, like you, still believe, even though you don't really need God in your daily existence. You are an inspiration to me. Because you believe, you help me to believe also.

I worked hard to understand Esau in his broken English and some Swahili thrown in and I think I got most of what he wanted to share. I mostly was able to assure him in response that I understood and appreciated what he wanted to say. I didn't really take the next difficult step and try to enter into theological dialogue with him, especially because I had a great desire that he keep his mind on his driving. But I actually did think more than one thing, in response, to what he had to say.

I thought a lot about the idea that no matter where you are in the world, believing in God is a difficult thing to do. No matter where you are in the world and no matter what the circumstances you experience in earthly life, there are reasons to not believe in God. People in third world countries may find it difficult to believe in God because life is so hard. And in the midst of the difficulty of life, God may seem very far away. And people in affluent countries may find it difficult to believe in God, ironically, because life is so easy. And in the midst of a relatively easy life, there may seem to be no reason why one would need God even if God did, perhaps exist.

The Bible, of course is aware of this very dynamic. The Bible knows throughout its pages that to believe in God is not the normal thing in human existence. No matter what the circumstances of earthly life, it is much more normal to **not** believe in God than **to** believe in God. To believe in the existence of God and, especially, to believe in the existence of a good and gracious God, is always understood to be the unusual, radical thing to believe.

It is true also in our second reading this morning. As Paul is writing to the Christians in Rome in this reading Paul is aware that faith in God is a difficult thing to maintain. Paul speaks of the believer being led into faith not by his or her own insight or spiritual strength, but rather by the power of the Spirit of God. And faith is something that can always be lost along the way. So, whenever it is true that we are able to cry the cry of faith, which Paul refers to as "Abba, Father," then it is, says Paul that the Spirit of God is active in our hearts and "is bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ..."

Dear friends in Christ, we are believers in Christ because the Spirit of God has worked the miracle of faith in our hearts. And we continue as believers in Christ in our time, right now, because the spirit of God continues to work the miracle of faith in our hearts. This is true for all Christians, even around the world, no matter the experience of earthly life we may happen to receive.

In addition, it is not only for this life right now that the Spirit is working this miracle of faith in our hearts.

Paul speaks of another existence that is yet to come. One of the ways Paul refers to that future existence for believers in Christ is as “the glory (that is) about to be revealed to us.” He is speaking, in simple terms, about heaven. And heaven, in Paul’s terms in this reading, will be the ultimate fruit of the Spirit for us then. Such that Paul is able to speak of our faith which we experience “now” as the “first fruits” of the existence in glory which we shall experience “then”.

This is the totality of the Spirit's desire for you and for me and for all people. To know the blessing of faith now. And to look forward to the glory that is yet to come. And so we do, by the power of the Holy Spirit of God. Amen.