

Scholars are trying to piece together
 a life-long conversation
 between Galileo and his daughter,
 who was a nun, through surviving letters.
 The letters she wrote to her father still exist
 in the National Library in Florence, Italy.
 However, upon the daughter's death,
 the mother abbess cleaned out her cell,
 and destroyed all the letters
 from Galileo, The Heretic.
 To piece together their common concerns,
 father and daughter,
 is trying to make a dialog out of a monologue.
 It is much the same as trying to piece together
 the dialogs between the Apostle Paul
 and the many churches to which he wrote.
 We don't have any of their letters to him,
 letters that would tell us about
 the real-life concerns
 these struggling Christian churches were facing.
 As if we are listening to one end of the phone call,
 we can only guess why Paul wrote
 the long and deep letter to the Roman Christians.
 We know little about their specific situation.
 From historical accounts we learn
 that Jews living in Rome
 in the middle of the first century were
 persecuted—
 evicted from houses of worship.
 We may presume that Christians in Rome
 were not treated any better.
 Reading between the lines of Paul's letter,
 we can surmise their predicament:
 "If we are children of God, why do we suffer?"
 Persecution – suffering for one's faith –
 is unfamiliar to us today in North America.
 Let's relate suffering for one's faith
 to a more familiar form of suffering:
 physical exercise.
 You know the saying: No pain, no gain.
 How many of you own an exercise machine?

More than one?
 How many of you still use your machines?
 We buy and hope, buy more and hope more.
 Hope springs eternal. False hope.
 The problem with exercise regimens
 is that we get discouraged
 when we don't see results in one or two weeks.
 We get impatient with the exercise routines,
 and tired of the hassle of it all.
 So we give up.
 Perhaps a similar impatience is being felt
 by those early Christians in Rome.
 They want quicker gains with fewer pains.
 So Paul challenges them to take a long-term view.
 He says in Romans 8, verse 18.
 "What we suffer now is nothing
 compared with the glory
 God will reveal to us later."
 And at verses 22 and 23:
 "We know that all creation
 has been groaning as in the pains of child-birth,
 right up to the present time.
 And we believers,
 even though we have the Holy Spirit within us
 as a foretaste of future glory,
 we also groan, while we wait to be released
 from sin and suffering."
 Paul ends with an insight
 about the relationship between pain and gain:
 "If we already have something,
 then we don't need to hope for it."
 In effect, Paul is saying that
 waiting in faith for the coming Kingdom
 is a maintenance activity.
 In a physical image: once we can fit into a size 12,
 we don't need to hope for it any longer.
 But we need a maintenance plan.
 If we already have a resting heart rate of 72,
 we don't need to keep hoping for it.
 But we need a maintenance plan.

Maintaining health involves some suffering,
some trade-offs, some sacrifice.

It helps if you exercise with someone else.
perhaps a partner, or even a physical trainer.
You can help each other not fall into old habits.
Paul appeals to the Roman church, collectively,
in the manner of a physical trainer:

Brothers and sisters, you have no obligation
to do what your sinful nature urges you to do.
For if you live by its dictates, you will die.
But if through the power of the Spirit
you put to death
the deeds of your sinful nature, you will live.

In other words,

Don't expect the Kingdom to come right away.

Meanwhile, don't fall into old habits.

As children of God, help one another
to stay in intimate relationship with God –
Abba, your common Papa.

Like those Christians of the first century,
we too wait to fully realize the Kingdom of God.
We have it in part, but only a part.

To suppress our anxiety about the kingdom,
we need to remind ourselves that
we do not tell God how to be God.

Paul tells us that there is a more difficult task
for our faith than to suppress anxiety
over the End Times, or the Day of Judgment:
We need to let go of the attitudes and actions
that prevent us from maintaining
the fitness of our relationship
with God and with our neighbors.

"It is not easy to endure,
this not-having-God, this waiting-for-God.

"Not having, not seeing,
not knowing, and not grasping all characterize
humanity's relationship with God."

That thought was uttered in 1955
by one of the 20th century's
most influential theologians, Paul Tillich.

In response to Tillich, I confess that
my relationship with God
is based on wishful optimism.

I hope life will be kind to me. It is a false hope.

If we are to share Christ's glory,
we must also share his suffering.

I hope I can keep myself healthy. It's a false hope.

If we are to share Christ's glory,
we must also share his suffering.

I hope for prosperity for our nation.

It's a false hope.

If we are to share Christ's glory,
we must also share his suffering.

Even the cosmos cries out in pain,

waiting for God's original purpose to be fulfilled. ■

Even the cosmos cries out in pain.

In 1965, about a year after JFK was assassinated,
Tillich delivered a sermon on "Our Right to Hope."

He described hope as a state of active waiting:
that is, anticipation, which can border on lunacy.

Lunacy is what Christian hope looks like
to the uninformed.

It's been 2000 years

since Christ promised to come again. Lunacy.

Better to put our hope in science and technology.

In our children.

In philosophy and the creative arts.

In Medicare and assisted living.

In soldiers and diplomats,

missiles and instant communications.

Shall we put all our hope in those? No.

It is trusting in what Paul calls simply, The Flesh.

That's his shorthand for "the ways of the world."

Hope in the flesh – salvation by Stairmaster –
better living thru diplomacy – is false hope.

That hope ends in death, the way of all flesh.

We will never "make" our world
convenient enough, smart enough,
beautiful enough, or secure enough.

Those are false hopes.

False hope usually is grounded
 in either fear or anxiety,
 such as the false hope
 that race doesn't matter anymore.
 What's wrong with any hope
 not grounded in the promises of God
 is that there is no end-point
 at which hope is fully realized.
 True hope is realized in full relationship with God.
 That's how I understand "eternal life" –
 presence with God, the eternal presence.
 And we begin that relationship here and now.
 We wait hopefully in the promise of eternal life
 because we have sufficient evidence of it
 in this life.
 Tillich says, we wait, both having and not having –
 but the having is enough to assure us
 of God's abiding presence and promise.
 From verse 23 of our lesson:
 We wait with eager anticipation of the day
 when God will give us our full rights
 as God's adopted children.
 Paul makes a sweeping comparison with childbirth:
 All flesh, all creation – all that is not God –
 is in the throes of a difficult labor, eons long.
 At some point the contractions
 will come faster and harder.
 "Yet what we suffer now is nothing
 compared to the glory to be revealed (v 18), –
 a wholly new thing in God's creation.
 The Spirit will fill its lungs and it will shout,
 like a baby shrieking its first words, Papa!
 The hope for the newborn creation
 is not that it will be "smart enough,
 beautiful enough, or secure enough."
 The hope for the new creation is to simply
 enjoy Abba, Papa, forever.
 As one pastor has commented,
 What more profound assurance could we receive
 in the midst of the world's anguish and travail

than to know that God is inseparable from us
 and we are inseparable from God?
 To return to the fitness metaphor,
 Paul sees the present age –
 the age since God was incarnate in Christ -
 as a period of Cross-Training,
 characterized by sweat, exertion, and suffering.
 In Cross-Training, Paul wants us to gain strength
 in the hope for God's new creation.
 The Holy Spirit will give us a second wind
 to persevere toward the Kingdom of God.
 When Cross-Trained,
 that is, trained for the Cross,
 our faith lives are conditioned
 by the suffering of our Savior.
 In faith, we participate in Christ's suffering,
 against a world of false hopes.
 And we participate in Christ's rising,
 living and eternal.
 We can thank God that gospel hope is rooted,
 not in the false hopes of the flesh,
 but in God's ultimate hope for the world.
 We can also thank God for the Biblical witness
 that gives us the God-view of time:
 Time runs forward;
 time has a beginning, a middle, and an end.
 "All time, both in history and in personal life,"
 says Tillich, "is expectation."
 What we are expecting is the end-time
 that is even now breaking in.
 We can wait impatiently, anxiously, fearfully.
 Or we can accept God's invitation to wait hopefully.
 Hope like the hope we feel
 in the first cries of a new-born,
 is not an act of will, but rather a response
 to the signs of the coming Kingdom.
 Though a woman giving birth
 cannot will herself to be hopeful,
 she can experience hope
 in response to painful contractions.

The great hopes of the present day
 are responses to the in-breaking Kingdom –
 greater justice, greater peace,
 more loving relationships,
 greater participation in government,
 more sustainable development.
 The great hope is not in the ways of the world;
 it is in the realization of God's hope for the world
 at this moment in time.
 Not in flesh, but in spirit.
 Not in six-pack abs, but in zest for living.
 Not in the pursuit of happiness, but the gift of joy.
 Not in the absence of pain,
 but in a taste Christ's victory over pain.
 Let us never doubt
 that God knows pain and suffering.
 Pain is never destructive
 if it conforms us to the cross – that is,
 brings us closer to the one who suffered for us.
 Let us not wonder too much
 about what the next life will bring.
 The good news is about Kingdom living
 in present times,
 even in the groans from the depths of our being.
 Kingdom living is about community
 with one another and with God.
 We are in training, together.
 The fellowship of the Holy Spirit
 and the company of our fellow believers
 can make this training time bearable.
 I exercise at a gym, all by myself.
 A few weeks ago a stranger approaching me
 on my exercise bike looked me in the eyes:
 Does it hurt that much?
 If we try to Cross-Train in faith by ourselves,
 we are that grim-faced exerciser
 who suffers through solitary workouts.
 That's no way to savor the taste of Christ's victory.
 The Romans to whom Paul was writing,
 those far-distant, struggling early Christians,
 may have labored under the false hope

of the imminent return of Christ
 as an empire-crusher.
 Why do we still suffer, they seem to be saying,
 if we've been freed from sin?
 We don't know this for sure,
 because we hear only Paul's end of the conversation.
 But Paul's answer is:
 God has built some uselessness, some futility
 into Creation.
 Do not try to understand God's plan,
 nor hope to control it.
 Just wait for it, with patience.

CONCLUSION

The co-moderators
 of the PC(USA) General Assembly
 have announced a year of study of racial injustice.
 We, the privileged, have for too long
 formed an understanding of racial injustice
 based on just one side of the conversation.
 We can acknowledge the role
 race still plays in American life
 and use this study period
 to engage in liberating two-way dialogue.
 We, the privileged, need to expose ourselves
 to the pain that our nation has historically inflicted
 on people of African descent.
 The story of race relations in this nation
 is cross-shaped.
 In the flesh, it is a history of pain.
 In the spirit, it is a history of liberation.
 To live by the spirit is to live now
 as you would live in the eternal presence of God –
 joyously, fully present, ever grateful.
 We all, personally and collectively,
 are heirs of God's glory.
 Let us share our inheritance
 with a world in need of generosity, love,
 peace, protection, nourishment, and healing.
 Cross-Trained for Kingdom living,
 we can do all this and more.
 Amen.