

I was privileged to serve as the chaplain at Camp Washington this week. I had a blast. I can't remember the last time I had to take my daily shower at night instead of in the morning because I was just too grubby to get into bed – that's how much fun I had! One of the things I got to do at camp was sit in on the Discovery Zone – which is the daily Bible study that all the kids attend. One day, our story was the Prodigal Son. As you probably know, in that story, there is a man with two sons, and one of them has just had it with all the chores he needs to do on the farm and decides he's going to get away from all that. So he asks his father to give him his share of the inheritance, which he generously does, and the young man up and leaves home and all its rules behind. In the bliss of his new found freedom, with no one telling him what to do, he spends all his money on wild and fun living until he finds himself penniless and out of options. He ends up working as a servant to a pig farmer, where, lonely and miserable, he hits the proverbial rock bottom one day as he's feeding the pigs. When he notices that he's beginning to think the tough bean pods he's feeding the pigs look pretty tasty, he wakes up, and as the story tells us, 'he comes to himself.' He thinks, "Wait a minute. My father's servants at our farm at home are never treated this poorly. They've always got plenty of food, and my father is a good master. Why am I sitting here in the mud when I could go back home and beg his forgiveness? Perhaps he'll allow me to stay and work for him."

That wild son had experienced firsthand the huge difference between being a slave and being an heir. And that's the illustration Paul uses in his letter to the Romans. He says we are all debtors who will need to answer to someone throughout our lives – or as Bob Dillon sings in his song – "You're going to have to serve somebody." Paul's words beg the question – would you rather serve the Spirit of God and be an heir to the Kingdom or serve the spirit of slavery into the pigpen of fear and death?

In Jesus' parable today, a sower spreads good seed all over his field, which must have been a field of very good soil, because not only does the seed spring right up, but a bunch of weeds quickly take root in it also. The master tells his slaves that if they pull up the pesky weeds, they'll dislodge the roots of the wheat and damage the crop. So he tells them not to try to weed the young field – but just to let the wheat and weeds grow together. When the wheat is mature, he tells them, they can remove and destroy the weeds and still get a full crop.

I think it's interesting in this story that despite the field being weedy, the farmer still expects a complete harvest. He believes that the wheat can produce despite the challenge of the weeds. I know that there are fields that are kept completely weed free through chemical farming methods, and they do produce more in the short term. But in the long run, their soil becomes weakened and the crops lack nutrition. So over time, a diverse and natural field is better for the wheat and for the earth. Our lives are like that, too. Though we may wish for a life without any weeds, where we live is more like a natural field, full of weedy problems and pain and losses and misunderstandings all around us and all through us. As I said last week, life is rarely smooth sailing. And as Paul put it, the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains, and we each groan inwardly while we wait for the redemption of our bodies. Jesus' parable indicates that our wheat will not be gathered into barns until the end of the age, whenever that is. So though Jesus tells this story of the weeds and the wheat as a comparison to the Kingdom of God, it's not a particularly cheery picture. Since life is a continual struggle with unwelcome weeds, our hopes and dreams can easily fizzle out.

But Paul tells the Romans that it is in hope that we are saved. The kind of hope he means, though, is not hope in something you've already seen. Just as the prodigal son discovered there was something he wished for that seemed like freedom, but was not really freedom, Paul says that there are things we wish for that seem like hope but are not really hope. He challenges us to seek a deeper hope in things we have not yet seen and cannot yet imagine.

It's quite alluring, though, to hope in good things we've already seen – riches, for example – as in, "When I earn enough money, I'll never have to serve anyone again." Or hoping in relationships, as in "When I find Mr. Right, all my troubles will be over." Or hoping in ourselves: "If I play my cards right, I can solve all my problems." Or hoping in modern medicine: "If I find the right doctor, I will be cured." There are lots of things to hope in –

things we have seen and want to believe in – but things that can quickly become masters we choose to serve. We can become slaves to this kind of hope, and find ourselves at a dead end with no inheritance.

But the saving hope Paul is talking about is the hope of those who are led by the Spirit of God. It is hope in an unseen God. It is hoping in a God that is more loving and forgiving than any parent we've ever experienced on earth. It is hoping in a righteousness that is more than the law we know, riches that are greater than what we can imagine, and healing that is deeper than curing. It is hoping in a life that exists beyond the one we are experiencing right here and now. It is hoping, as Paul said, that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. This is hope that the crazy, weedy Kingdom of God is more beautiful and just and glorious than our little human minds can possibly imagine – that *we* are more glorious than we could possibly imagine. It is the hope that can contain all other hopes and is yet still beyond all other hopes. It is hope we could never even approach without the grace of God, and for that we are truly indebted to God.

In Christ, God came to earth and experienced what it means to serve. Christ lived a life that was fully human, full of pain, full of sorrows, full of work and suffering and weeds of all kinds. But those of us who follow the Spirit of God are also, like Jesus, children of God, for we have received not the spirit of slavery, but the spirit of adoption. When we call God "Father" or "Mother", we are bearing witness with our spirits that we, too, are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.

So let us pray:

God we thank you for taking us under your wing as a mother hen gathers her chicks. Grant us hope beyond all other hopes in the saving power of your healing love, that the toil of our days is spent for your glory, and our lives are freely given in service to you. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.