

I don't know if you have ever seen Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ*. That movie is very graphic in its depiction of the passion. It reveals that the power of Rome was a force to be reckoned with. Behind the marble statues and the beautiful monuments to peace was a brutal power and system of punishment that stripped its enemies of human dignity and ruled by force. Yet it in the middle of that system, God worked. One person, not riding in triumphal procession through Rome, but making his way through the streets of Jerusalem, is our source of peace and hope. Gibson's movie has one scene that captures this vision of God and the sacrifice of Jesus that brings peace. It's that moment when Jesus speaks to his mother Mary on the way to the crucifixion. Jesus is bloodied and beaten. He is carrying his cross through the crowded streets of Jerusalem. He falls for the third time and Mary, his mother, reaches out as if to catch him. Her mind is filled with images of the past. She remembers him running to her in the streets of Nazareth. These images of the past only make the present more painful. She realizes that this time she cannot catch him, she cannot save him. This day her Son is going to die.

But when Mary reaches out to Jesus, Jesus stops and reaches out to catch her with a word. We have a moment where we see Jesus. His face bruised and bloodied. In the background is the cross. But his eyes are filled with wonder. He turns to his mother Mary and he says, “Behold I make all things new”. When Mary's mind is filled with images of the past, Jesus offers her a promise of the future. When Mary's heart is breaking over the end, Jesus comforts her with the new beginning. When Mary sees death, Jesus reveals to her life. Jesus teaches Mary to see this horrible destruction as God's most creative act.

God is in control and at work for the world in the self-sacrifice of Jesus. While Rome flexes its military muscle and the religious leaders implement their deceptive strategies and God's people give in to despair and give up their hope, God is in control, at work for his world. Jesus walks through the streets of Jerusalem to offer his life as the one true sacrifice that forgives all sins for all people for all time. Jesus is our source of peace with God and hope for the world. This is the peace that Paul knows and proclaims to the Roman Christians and to you today. But this peace isn't something that we only look back at, remembering an event in the annals of history. Just as he did with the Roman Christians, Paul invites you today to live in this peace now, as you experience the kingdom of God.

What does such life look like? Notice the type of things that Paul celebrates in his listing. It celebrates the small, seemingly inconsequential ways of God. Acts of brotherly affection. Caring for the needs of the saints. Taking notice of the lowly. And even loving one's enemies. Offering a cup of water or a gift of food to an enemy who is thirsty and hungering. These are the ways of the kingdom of God. The Romans carved figures of leadership into marble and made them into gods as a way of celebrating power. God forms his kingdom not with stones but with flesh and blood. He takes you as his people, washes you in the waters of baptism, fills you with his Spirit and brings you to life. His work may not be noticed by the world. It may not be celebrated as a major turning point in history. No, it may simply be a moment when you rejoice

with someone who rejoices or weep with someone who weeps. But this is a working of God. A real life expression of God's Spirit, at work in our world, bringing about a different kind of peace. When encountered as a listing, a series of exhortations that come over us all at once, these words can be confusing and challenging. We don't know where to start. But when encountered as a community, a way in which God's Spirit works through flesh and blood in this world, these words are comforting and encouraging. They open our eyes to see the ways in which God is near us, very near us in daily life. Once you hear these words from Paul, you begin to see God at work among his people all the time. And the vision, no matter how small, no matter how insignificant, can bring you joy.

Consider the pastor who went to the hospital to visit a church member. She was in the last stages of cancer, heavily medicated, unresponsive, but he went to weep with those who weep. When he rounded the corner he was surprised by what he saw. Her daughter was there at the foot of the bed. She had taken the sheets and thrown them back and was putting lotion on her mother's body, starting at the feet. This was some expensive lotion. More than the daughter could afford. As he walked into the room, the room smelled beautiful. The daughter gave him a mischievous smile and made him promise not to tell her children. Her kids had given her this lotion for Mother's Day. "Because you never do anything for yourself," they said. And here she was, putting that lotion on her mother's feet. Her mother was unresponsive. She wouldn't know the difference. But the pastor did. That day, he saw a vision of the kingdom of God. Not carved in marble but formed in flesh and blood. Immersed in suffering. Yet alive in love. Mother and daughter. Giving mercy. Receiving mercy. Surrounded by death and dying, yet living in an act of selfless love.

This is the vision Paul invites us to see this morning. He invites you to look around you at the people God has gathered in this place. You can see God at work. Not in great stories of massive military victories but in small stories of self-sacrifice and everyday acts of love.

Let us pray: Father, Son, Holy Spirit, open our eyes to see that the kingdom for which we pray, when we pray, Thy Kingdom Come, is here, right now, in the gifts of love that you give to your church, your Word and Sacraments, and in the people who receive those gifts. By the working of your Spirit, may the love we receive here be the love we give. In Jesus' Name we pray: Amen.