

All Things Working Together for Good

Romans 8:26-39

The Rev. Erica Wimber Avena

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Prayer: We seek to understand your will, O God: to know what is so valuable in life that it is worth all we have and all we are. Grant us discernment to see you at work for good even when events around us disappoint us or seem flagrantly wrong. Nourish us in your covenant and set our hearts free to rejoice in Christ's work in our world even now...

In 2015 Representative John Lewis attended a Comic-Con event one day to promote "March" his three-part graphic novel memoir. His message was that "you don't need super powers to be a hero. He was trying to show ... how his faith and his belief in America fundamentally put him in a position where they would look at him as a hero."

Now that doesn't necessarily sound like a superhero work. Or is it?

On that day he said "I walked with little children, wonderful little children. We marched onto the floor of the convention center. (He was channeling his younger life's work.) And it was unreal, unbelievable. And this throng of people just walkin' with us..."¹

A simple action, walking together. In this context, deeply meaningful, echoing other marches in another era, and our continuing hope that someday this nation will not cultivate division and animosity, but value the dignity of all of our citizens and respect our foreign neighbors.

Is that the work of superheroes? Or just ordinary folk... coming together?

John Lewis was trained as a clergyman at a historically black seminary in Nashville, Tennessee, he was a longtime member of a UCC church, and his life's work and calling was to serve our country. A calling which included plenty of set-backs, personal injury, and reversals.

Romans 8 is a great chapter to read and re-read if you are struggling. Some of the most hopeful language in the Bible is here, connected with the acknowledgment of our weakness to achieve and hold onto the things we want. Paul begins "the Spirit helps us in our weakness...And God, who searches the heart... intercedes for us... we know all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose..."

I want to point out that this verse gets twisted around out there by people who want to use it – for their own purposes. Prosperity gospel preachers try to make this about us individually, it isn't a promise that every life will be blessed and abundant, happy and healthy, brimming with opportunity. This isn't an individual promise at all. Rather, it asks us to put ourselves in perspective. Paul is taking a bigger view, this is all working together, all the lives, all the suffering, all the COVID19 sickness and the economic struggle, the one step forward two

steps backwards feeling you get sometimes. The fear, the doing without, the fear, the unknowing, the fear again... the losses... the fear...

This is some of the deepest theological material we have in the Bible. You get a glimpse into the heart of God – all things are working together for good – God is bending it all towards good. No matter how bad the day, there is a redemption coming in the future tense. The way this is written underscores that Paul believes this is true of God, not of us as individuals, human suffering still goes on, ignorance, struggle, futility like we talked about last week. Each of us are born to different circumstances, all human lives contain suffering, yet God makes it – will make it, has already made it – all work together for good. That is the work of God, the nature of God, the will of God...among us.

In the New York Times obituary of Representative John Lewis last week, it described Mr. Lewis' belief in what is called "redemptive suffering" which he explained was "something in the very essence of anguish that is liberating, cleansing, redemptive," ...(it) "touches and changes those around us as well. It opens us and those around us to a force beyond ourselves, a force that is right and moral, the force of righteous truth that is at the basis of human conscience." And he goes on to say that "the essence of the nonviolent life, is the capacity to forgive – even as a person is cursing you to your face, even as he is spitting on you, or pushing a lit cigarette into your neck – and to understand that your attacker is as much a victim as you are..."²

John Lewis bore the scars in his later years of several violent encounters with attackers. But what gave him the moral high ground, what allowed him to be effective, and to maintain influence, meaningful influence throughout his life, was his ability to forgive. His ability to see in his adversary, the same depth of victimization, only in someone else's life experience completely unlike his own.

And that my friends *is* a superpower. The deep power of forgiveness. To recognize and work with the reconciling work that God is doing in the world. This is where freedom can be found, this is where mutual respect is borne, this is how to access and to live the moral compass that continues to bend the long arm of history towards justice. (To paraphrase Dr MLK.)

- * If you had the courage, what would you do today?
- * If you could forgive, who would you forgive this week?
- * What is the good trouble, necessary trouble, that you can step into, right now – to benefit someone else?
- * When you walk into these, you walk in faith; and while you are stepping out, you might remember that people who have gone before you, like John Lewis who was good at marches, (walking into good trouble, necessary trouble) will link up arms with you, and the redeeming God walks with you, always.

You don't need superpowers to be a hero! Faith and love put you in a position to look like a superhero. For disciples everywhere there's a simple principle behind it all: all things are working together for good... you can't stop it; don't fight it. Join up!

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Benediction:

By way of closing Benediction today, I'd like to use an excerpt from John Lewis' Benediction at the National Prayer breakfast in February of this year:

...I pray for Christian believers to enter into a new conversation about Jesus — what he said, what he meant, and what that means now in our public life. Let us enter into those honest and vital conversations about who Jesus is and who he wants us to be, especially between our black, brown, and white churches.

I pray that citizens of different political persuasions refrain from attacking each other's character, but rather try to understand each other's deep concerns and hopes for their futures. In particular, help us to talk together about our hopes and fears for our children's lives and learn that we want the same things for our kids' futures.

In the midst of what is now a political, constitutional, moral, and spiritual crisis, with no certainty of how it will be resolved, we all pray, "Lord have mercy."

Oh Lord, replace our feelings of helplessness and hopelessness with a commitment to courageous action and the hope that we believe can only come from you.

*"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen."
Hebrews 11:1*

Amen

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¹ New York Times, July 21, 2020, by Sandra E. Garcia, "When John Lewis Cosplayed at Comic-Con as His Younger Self"

² New York Times editorial board, July 17 2020 "John Lewis Risked His Life for Justice"