

## It's All Good

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June 14, 2015

“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” -- Romans 8:28

Anybody here like Buckeyes? I'm talking about the sweet confection – cookie or candy, depending on your terminology. I know Kim Lorentz likes them because she gave us a tutorial yesterday morning here in the church kitchen on how to make them. Our church, along with the other eighty or so churches in the Western Reserve Association, has been asked by the organizers of General Synod to make one hundred dozen Buckeyes for the delegates and guests at General Synod later this month, and it looks like we're going to make it. Eleven people have signed up to make Buckeyes at home and freeze them, and these folks are making eight dozen apiece, so I think, with a little extra push from one or two of you who haven't yet signed up, that we'll meet our goal of a hundred dozen of these peanut butter and chocolate sweets. And a big thank-you to Marilyn Wilson for coordinating this effort, as well as to Kim and all our other cooks.

I'd never heard of Buckeyes – the cookie or candy – until I moved here, and it turns out that they aren't all that hard to make. Here's the list of ingredients:

- 4 cups of butter
- 2 cups of peanut butter
- 3 teaspoons of vanilla
- 10-12 cups of powdered sugar
- 12 ounces of chocolate chips.

I won't go through the steps – you can find copies of the recipe on the bulletin board opposite the kitchen – but I was thinking that, even if you like the finished product, you probably wouldn't want to eat most of those ingredients on their own. The peanut butter and chocolate chips wouldn't be so bad, but most of us wouldn't want to eat eight sticks of butter – or even one stick of butter – three teaspoons of vanilla or even a single cup of powdered sugar by themselves.

Or most of the other ingredients, like flour and salt and baking powder, that go into cakes and pies and breads and cookies. You don't eat these things by themselves. The same is true for most of cooking, in fact. Most of us wouldn't find eating an onion or a clove of garlic all that appetizing on its own, but mixed in with other ingredients, they make food delicious. It's the right ingredients in the right amounts combined in the right way that makes cooking the remarkable achievement that it is. We take cooking for granted – some of us even consider it an unpleasant chore – but cooking, like religion, is one of the activities that makes us human; no other member of the animal kingdom cooks its food or fashions gods to worship.

When the apostle Paul wrote to the Roman Christians that “all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose,” it was with the perspective on life that a cook has on the raw ingredients, say, for Buckeyes that he was writing.

We know that all things, by themselves, do not work together for good. All things, by themselves, do not work together at all. In and by themselves, things are what they are, oblivious of their relationship to other things. A tree is a tree – or, as Gertrude Stein might have put it, a tree is a tree is a tree. A tree doesn't work together with soil and sunlight and water to be a tree. If the right conditions of those elements are present in the right way, and a seed falls into them, a tree may grow there. But the combination is not the tree's to recognize or decide or make happen – to work together, in other words. The tree is brought forth from a combination of factors wholly beyond its recognition and control. That bringing forth is the working together that Paul writes of, and Paul is convinced that it's for good. And that working together for good is what we call the will of God. And that will belongs to God, not to the tree and not to us.

And that's where we often run into difficulties in our thinking and feeling about God, because so much of the world doesn't seem to be working together for the good of anything. And if Paul had simply written to the Christians at Rome that all things work together for good – and left it at that – Paul's thought would have been as much ancient history by now as that of the Stoics or the Epicureans, and Christianity might very well have been stillborn.

From a lifetime of remarkable experience – arrests, beatings, shipwreck, imprisonment, cold, hunger, rejection, and a personality-altering religious conversion -- Paul knew and said that all things work together, not in general, but for those who love God and are called according to God's purposes. That's the important part – loving God and responding to that love as God's call to us. It's within that spiritual framework, finally, that the world makes sense, and even more than sense. We can see the world not simply as an evolutionary accident, but rather as a creation that is indeed what the writer of Genesis called it: good and even very good.

And it takes that perspective – God's perspective, which can be our perspective because God became one of us – to see that the raw ingredients of creation do, in fact, in the long run, work together for good. It's not always easy to recognize that unfolding of reality as being according to God's will, and sometimes we simply have to admit to the baffling mystery that constitutes the Big Picture.

This past Thursday I read an article in the paper about the two seniors from Hawken School who were killed just days before they were to be graduated last month. By their peers' accounts, Josh Weil and Alex Doody were generous, gifted, promising young men, preparing for college careers at Middlebury in Vermont and Cornell in New York. Only those who have suffered the anguish of a child's death – and I know that some here this morning have – know what that pain is like for a parent, and of all the raw ingredients that make up this life of ours, losing a child is among the most painfully raw. One of life's supreme paradoxes is that the whole purpose of parenting is to protect and prepare children for a world from which they ultimately cannot be protected, and that world includes themselves. Every year at this time we know that we'll read accounts – or even be told in a phone call – of young lives cut short, and we are reminded that all those raw ingredients of life – including a Jeep Cherokee slamming into a tree on a country road – do not work together for good.

And we know that it's not merely we who suffer; as Paul recognized so long ago, the creation itself groans to be set free from its bondage to decay. Theologians in most of the world's great religions have long recognized that evil comes at us from two broad directions: moral evil, which is the wrong exercise of the human will, and natural evil, such as earthquakes and tsunamis. We aren't responsible for much of the suffering in creation, but like Justice Potter Stewart said of pornography, we know it when we see it.

Thousands of babies are born healthy every day, and new families go home from

the hospital happy and full of hope. One child is born with Edwards Syndrome and lives but a few days, and shattered parents go home to try to rebuild their lives. We don't dismiss that as simply an unfortunate roll of the genetic dice; we see it as creation not functioning according to God's will, and therefore a natural evil. Babies are born to live, not to die, which the prophet Isaiah recognized centuries before Jesus: "No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days," he said of the new Jerusalem, "or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred shall be considered accursed" (65:20).

The God of Christians and Jews is the God who wills more for us than simply the world that we know, with its raw ingredients of highway accidents and dysentery. There is too much suffering, too much struggle, too much waste, too much lost potential for us to believe that this is the way God intends life to be. And it is this ancient sense of more – that there is more to life than the endless cycle of birth and decay – that has convinced many of us of the truth of transcendence, that there is a reality that transcends this reality, and we call that transcendent reality God.

To believe in God and in the fundamental goodness of creation isn't simply retreating into sentimentality in the face of life's grim realities. Those of us who take our faith seriously don't shy from the truth, even when our hearts are captured by splendor.

On summer days such as we're enjoying right now, when Chloe and I take our walk in the Euclid Creek Reservation, and we're about to descend from the peak of the hill at the southern end of the reservation into the gorge carved from the Euclid bluestone by the creek, we can look straight ahead into miles of beautiful green trees. There is lush green all around us, from the grass under our feet to the forest canopy above our heads. Green, green green – northeast Ohio's version of the Garden of Eden. For a tree-hugger like me, it is transcendently beautiful.

And yet I know that within all of that beautiful lushness, there is death, decay, and suffering. I know that even as I delight in that green beauty, the trees are passing from life to death. I know that there are insects being devoured by birds and snakes and frogs, who are themselves being devoured by other creatures. I know that there are animals being killed by other animals. And I know that even the dog and I are simply at one stage in that cycle of life and death, and that our stage ends much too quickly.

I know all of that. But the conviction of millions of us, from time immemorial, is that the cycle of life and death that we both love and dread is what makes up life, not death. The great miracle of being itself – that there's something and not nothing – is all the miracle some of us need to persuade us of that transcendent reality we call God – Yahweh, Allah, Om, Gayatri, Bhagavan – whatever term you please.

And that difference in perspective and trust is what constitutes faith, and it was that faith that allowed Paul and allows us to say, It's all good. Beneath and beyond the cycle of life and death – and the goal toward which that cycle moves – is not sorrow and suffering and death, but rather goodness and life and love. The reality of suffering cannot be denied – and Paul's words are no attempt to deny it – but suffering can be redeemed, and it is redeemed by a reality greater than both life and death as we know them, and we call that reality love.

"For love is strong as death," the Song of Solomon tells us, "passion fierce as the grave." That's not youthful inexperience rhapsodizing from the flush of young love; it's a conviction born of hard-won experience. Every one of us here this morning knows that the grave did not end our love – for a parent or grandparent, for a sibling or a friend, for a spouse or a child. We loved them and that love lives on in us. And there are those who love us, and their love will live in them after we're gone. And when they're gone, others who love will remain, and love will remain with them, for as long as life endures. Love

always survives the grave. Each time we stand at a grave and weep, we acknowledge the reality of death and loss; but it is our very tears that constitute the proof of love, for no one weeps for that which they do not love.

Friends, there is no denying that some of the ingredients that make up life, like some of the ingredients that make up Buckeyes, are nothing we would willingly taste on their own. By themselves, we would avoid them if we could. But not one of life's bitter ingredients – the hardships, the struggles, the conflicts, the illnesses, the uncertainties, the moments of helplessly standing by – none of them by themselves constitute life. It's only when we step back from the pain and allow the Holy Spirit to refocus our gaze, that we can see life for what it truly is. And then, in some mysterious operation of grace on our souls, we make the sublime and not at all ridiculous realization: It's all good.