

Text: Romans 8:14-27

Title: Not Pretty

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Series: Growing Season (Lectionary)

For: Community CRC, Kitchener, ON

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There's a novel by Chaim Potok called *My Name is Asher Lev*. And it's about a young boy growing up in a Hasidic Jewish community in Brooklyn. And Asher loves to draw. In fact the whole book is about his journey growing up into a very gifted artist. As a young boy it's obvious he has a way of seeing the world that is different. And he is moved to draw what he sees. To draw the truth.

While his mother sees his gift, she is also troubled by it. A good little religious boy studies the Torah and doesn't spend all his time drawing nonsense. And the two of them have a short but profoundly formative conversation about what Asher should draw early on. His mother encourages him:

You should make the world pretty, Asher. Make it sweet and pretty.

It's nice to live in a pretty world.

And to make his mother happy, Asher tries to draw only birds and flowers and nice, pretty things. But the world he sees around him, including his mother's own depression and darkness, doesn't seem so sweet or so pretty. And as he grows up and develops his gift as an artist, he realizes that to draw the world pretty is to lie. To tell the truth in his art is to draw the world as it is. In all its darkness. In all its suffering. And he forms a resolution that will guide his life and art and faith:

The world is not pretty. And I will not draw it that way.

While we're parachuting into Romans here in the middle of Chapter 8, Paul has been going for quite some time already. Arguing and persuading and teaching enthusiastically and methodically about the freedom and liberation and power of being saved from sin and death by the life and grace and mercy of God in Jesus Christ.

The ones who first heard this letter read out loud at one of their gatherings were a mix of slaves and former slaves, people who knew the power of Rome, not because they wielded it, but because they were at its mercy in their everyday life. And so Paul's message about breaking chains of sin and death and being free in Jesus struck home for them. His words were like water on dry ground.

For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again. Rather the Spirit you received brought about your own adoption. And by the Spirit we now cry, “Abba! Father!”

But then they looked at the world around them. And, well, the world wasn't pretty.

For the enslaved ones among them, they still went back to the families that owned them. They may be adopted in Jesus but that doesn't change their status under Roman law. For all of them, just gathering to hear Paul's letter brought the risk of being caught and beaten. The Spirit may not make them slaves, but Rome still certainly does. And as they look around at their world, they still see cause to live in fear.

If Paul had simply said, “None of that matters! None of that is real. Don't worry about it. Just think about nice things.” I wouldn't blame them at all if they each got up and walked out while the letter was still being read.

But Paul tells the truth about the world. He looks at their world and knows what they face and what they fear. And he refuses to lie about it.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning like a woman in labour right up to this present time. The creation is in pain and struggle. And we are too. We know the promises of God, we've received the Spirit that reminds us we're children of God, but we groan too. We know pain too. Not just in the world around us, but in our lives. We wait for the redemption of our broken bodies and broken lives here and now.

This portion of scripture is popping up in lots of places right now. Perhaps because more than at any moment in our lived experience can we say without hesitation that creation is groaning and we look out at the world with fear of what we see.

The world isn't pretty.

And Paul shows us that we don't have to pretend that it is. We don't have to lie and say everything is okay. 'Cause we know it's not.

We didn't need a pandemic to make the groans of creation real, but maybe the pandemic has helped us hear more clearly the groans that were always there. Of the world around us. Of our own lives.

We can more clearly hear the groans of the natural world around us, as we witness the change of the past few months.

How the creation itself must breathe a sigh of relief as once smog covered cities see blue skies again in the absence of miles of cars stuck in traffic.

How wildlife tentatively began to explore small towns as people stayed inside rather than living in fear.

These small glimpses of the natural world being less constricted by our use of it makes it so much harder to ignore our impact on the world God created, the world he continues to sustain, and the world we misuse so horribly.

And we can more clearly hear the groans of those who struggle for deliverance and life in their very bodies.

Those on ventilators and battling Covid.

The groans of grief for those who die.

In some parts of this world, endless rows of mass graves as the bodies became too many to bury individually. And in this part of the world, too many of our vulnerable in long term care homes have died alone.

And we can more clearly hear our own wordless groans in the silence. As we face our own fear of death, our own anger at how this broken world can hurt and harm those we love.

For some of us we are only just waking up to the fragility of our bodies, how easily our lives can be changed and overturned, because of the pandemic, for others you've lived with that truth far longer than the rest of us. We are just catching up to you.

The creation groans. And we do, too. The world isn't pretty. And we won't draw it that way.

Chaim Potok's novel ends with Asher's first major showing at a museum in New York. Not far from his family's home in Brooklyn. Against his mother's encouragement to make the world pretty, Asher spent years drawing the world true. With a keen eye for the hard edges. For the suffering. For the groaning parts of this broken world.

And the biggest focus of his first show was a set of paintings with a dominate theme:

crucifixion.

Including one of his mother in their Brooklyn apartment with arms out stretched, face filled with pain. A glimpse of her depression. Or her darkness. And for Asher, a Jewish young man, raised in a strict Hasidic household, the image of Jesus on the cross was the only way to portray the truth of the pain of the world that he saw:

I created this painting - an observant Jew working on a crucifixion because there was no aesthetic mold in my own religious tradition into which [I] could pour a painting of ultimate anguish...

To draw the truth of the pain of the world, the boy who refused to pain the world pretty, Asher drew Christ crucified.

Paul seems to echo this, when he writes:

if we are children of God, then we are heirs - heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings

As children of God, we stand in the space between the love of God on the one hand and the pain of the world around us, on the other. Telling the truth about both. And looking to Jesus as the Crucified One at the centre of both God's love for the world and the reality of the pain of the world.

To be a follower of Jesus, a child of God, to be led by the Spirit, is to see the world as it is. In all its brokenness. With all its groans. Not to pretend we live in a pretty world and shut our ears and eyes and hearts to what's around truly us.

But that's not the whole truth of the world either.

Asher could only see the world as it was. The pain and the struggle. He could only draw the pain of the world on the cross, not the hope of the world in an empty tomb.

For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God....and we groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption, for the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope, we were saved. But

hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? If we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it with eager expectation.

As children of God, living between the love of God and the pain of the world, we know the world isn't pretty.

But we also know that this is not the way it's supposed to be.

As children of God, led by the Spirit, we know and trust that the very same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead is at work not just in our broken bodies but in the whole of creation to make all things new in the future God has planned for the world God loves, for the world God died for, the world God made.

As children of God, led by the Spirit, we see the world as it is, and we hope for the world we do not yet see. A world redeemed and beautiful. A world restored and renewed. Where every tear is wiped away and there is no more disease. No more dying. No more decay.

As children of God, led by the Spirit, when we are overwhelmed, when we don't know what to pray for, when the pain is just too much, and we can only draw the darkness of what we see,

the Spirit helps us in our weakness. The Spirit comes alongside us and prays for us with wordless groans. Taking up our pain and hope and transforming it into prayer, according to the will of God.

May you tell the truth of the world around you, refusing to paint it pretty...

May you refuse to lie about the darkness, instead speaking the truth that this is not the way it's supposed to be.

May you hold to the hope of God's future for the whole creation redeemed and restored.

And may you know and trust the presence and power of the Spirit praying with you when you simply can't.

In the name of the One who is the centre of God's love and the world's pain and our hope.

Amen.