

A Gauntlet with a Gift In't

by CHARLES L. BARTOW

Text: Romans 8:28-30

Dr. Charles Bartow is Professor of Speech Communication at Princeton Theological Seminary. He delivered this sermon in the Miller Chapel at the Opening Convocation service on January 24, 2005.

THE TITLE FOR the sermon, “A Gauntlet with a Gift In't,” is from a poem by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Thus the peculiar “in't” for “in it.” And no, the gauntlet is not seminary and the gift in't is not reading week or even commencement. But more of that later. The specific text for the sermon is Romans, chapter 8, verse 28: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” I don't think you will find a more ringing declaration of faith than that in the whole of sacred Scripture or in the history of the church. “We know”—do we?—“that all things work together for good.” At this very moment, though, I can tell you of three grown children, two daughters, one son, who in the months prior to the atrocities of September 11, 2001, lost their father to a particularly gruesome metastasized cancer of the lungs and esophagus. To this day, for them, what we know may not be clearly true at all. With those grown children, and with their grief, the questions come thronging to put at issue what we know, and what Saint Paul insists we know.

In Darfur—Sudan—need we be reminded?—genocide has left thousands of daughters and sons fatherless and motherless, and parents childless. And in Iraq, Israel, and Palestine, grief abounds without let-up as terror and counter-terror take their toll in innocent or not so innocent blood. Even nature itself swells with terror, and, in an instant, sweeps away thousands upon thousands, as with the earthquake and tidal wave in the Indian Ocean last month. Nor has this campus this past academic year been spared visitation from “the last enemy.”¹ Yet “we know,” we say, “that all things work together for good.” All things? Can war, pestilence, tyranny, and even natural disaster, those instruments of would-be-imperial death, be made to work to human advantage and divine purpose?

The issue can be joined nearer to home. With the poet “follow right to the bottom of the night. . .”² Trace the ignorance of charity, of what makes for peace and life's flourishing, to its root in the mind and heart of persons

¹ 1 Corinthians 15:26, NRSV. All biblical citations in the sermon are from the NRSV.

² W. H. Auden, “In Memory of W.B. Yeats,” in *Selected Poetry of W.H. Auden* (New York: Random House, 1958), 54.

zealous for God even as known in Christ. Saint Paul spoke of it in himself, the war raging between his flesh and spirit. "I know that nothing good dwells within me," the apostle said. "I can will what is right but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Rom. 7:18-19). And he cried out, anguished perhaps as some blind Lear upon a blasted moor: "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death" (Rom. 7:24). Then, in the same breath, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 7:25); and, just a chapter later in his letter to the Romans, this: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." No resignation to his fate. No truce with the death at work in him or in anyone or anything else. No careless speaking of "peace, peace," when there is no peace" (Jer. 6:14; 8:11), but love, holy love, which hates what it must hate for the sake of loving what it must love if it is to know any lasting love at all. Therefore this further question: Who are those who love God? Who are those who are called according to God's purpose? I'll tell you who they are if Paul, the apostle, is to be counted among them. They are those who not only know the griefs common to humanity, but who know as well the struggles of mind and heart and body, the triumphs and failures, and danger too, of women and men for whom conformity "to the image of [God's] Son" (Rom. 8:29) entails, besides a "glory to be revealed" (Rom. 8:18), a cross to be taken account of, not only as a terrible fact of history, but as a scandal to be confronted daily in their own life.

When he wrote his letter to the Romans, a document some scholars regard as his last will and testament, Paul, the apostle, was in Corinth. There he was gathering the last of the gifts he intended to take from the wealthier churches of Macedonia and Asia Minor to the struggling poor of the church in Jerusalem. Jerusalem would not prove altogether welcoming to the apostle, however. Opposition to him would mount there among his former temple and synagogue brethren. In a short time, in fact, he would face harassment, arrest, and trial. His missionary work, primarily in the gentile world, would be interrupted. Later it would be brought to a full end. His immediate capture would culminate in a trip to Rome under guard. In Rome he would be subjected to house-arrest, yet have there, even in "the prison of his days," freedom sufficient to "teach the free man [or woman] how to praise."³ Then, as tradition has it, he would be released for a while, only later to be imprisoned again. At last, scholars surmise, he was beheaded on the Ostian

³ Auden, *Ibid.*

Way, during a period of persecution of Christians, whether they were citizens of Rome or not, in accordance with a policy instituted by Nero in A.D. 64.

In Saint Paul's day all it took to get yourself killed was to believe in and proclaim Christ Jesus, crucified, risen, regnant. In our own day the killing goes on, in Indonesia and Sudan not long ago, and, yet more recently, in Lebanon, Iraq, Pakistan, and Yemen.⁴ There is in fact finally no safe place for anybody in a world where love for God can get a Christ crucified, or an apostle martyred, or a western woman, Margaret Hassan, converted to the Muslim faith, beheaded, who for love's sake, and for hatred of poverty and ignorance, and the devastation of armed conflict, gave of her substance, all that was in her, for the care and nurture of the children of Iraq "suffering in the wake of the Gulf War."⁵ Yet, no matter our thronging questions, no matter the perils without or the torments within, Saint Paul has declared, and the church has confessed, and an army of martyrs has given witness to what people of faith have known from A.D. 64 to A.D. 2005, namely, "that all things work together for good for those who love God." And it just could be that someone in this chapel or elsewhere on this campus right now, has found comfort in such a thought, or sought to comfort somebody else with it. For the answer to the questions that stir up doubts as the subtext of faith is not to be found in arguments—which, in any case, must unsettle as much as they settle—but in the person of him who "has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases" (Isa. 53:4) and in the lives of the saints who love him, and in the lives of those women and men and children, saints or not, whom he loves. And whom does he not love? Believe it: "All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."

It is an "effectual calling." That's the way the theologians speak of it. It is not an invitation to consider the possibility that perhaps the crucified Christ is Lord of the world and head of the church which is his body. It is, instead, a conscription into a way of life that attests his Lordship. To love God, in other words, is to live and die in testimony to Jesus' sovereignty. It is not to harbor a hidden affection for him. It is not to nurse a purely warm and intimate relationship to him. In fact, don't even think of praying for a more warm and intimate relationship with Jesus unless you are ready to get with it a full measure of self-dissatisfaction, and discomfort with the world as it is and with the church as it is, that consternation of the soul Saint Paul spoke of when he said, "I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand" (Rom. 7:21).

⁴ Philip Yancey, "Hope for Abraham's Sons," *Christianity Today* 48 (Nov. 2004): 120.

⁵ "Milestones," *Time Magazine* 164 (Nov. 29, 2004): 23.

Concerning prayer, Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote, in her poem, "Aurora Leigh":

God answers sharp and sudden on some prayers,
And thrusts the thing we have prayed for in our face,
A gauntlet with a gift in't.⁶

Or, as George Arthur Buttrick, scholar-pastor-preacher some generations ago, put it in a query: "What did Jesus 'get out' of prayer?" "The answer," said Buttrick, "might be 'Calvary.'"⁷ The gift in the gauntlet thrust in the face of any prayer for a warm and intimate relationship with Jesus, or any relationship with Jesus of any kind, is Jesus himself, as he is attested in Holy Scripture, sovereign in our human affairs as he was sovereign at Calvary, lifting the burden of our guilt and agony, our doubt and despair, as a weight of glory. If you cannot find the love of God there, you cannot find it anywhere. If not in pain, then not in pleasure; if not in sorrow, then not in joy; if not in martyrdom, then not in deliverance from martyrdom; if not in death, then not in life, not even in eternal life. If not face-to-face with the scandal of the Crucified, then not at all, anywhere, ever.

Precisely because the church itself—and its academies—is so prone to the evils it abhors, as Saint Paul noted in himself and as the history of the church makes clear concerning the church, precisely because the church may mistake its will for God's will, its own way as the way of the Lord, precisely because it has not proven itself above hardball politics and even bloodshed, precisely because it has borne false witness against its neighbors—as seems to be the habit of contemporary political partisans—precisely because of all that, "We need to keep it constantly in mind," said missional theologian and erstwhile Bishop of the Church of South India, Lesslie Newbigin, "that when Jesus sent his disciples out into the world, he first showed them his hands and his side. The scars of the passion are the authenticating signs by which the church is recognized as his representative," its weakness, his strength, the foolishness of its gospel—the "good news" of the cross—the wisdom and the power of God.⁸

The father dying of metastasized lung and esophageal cancer, whom I mentioned at the start of this sermon, prayed, I heard him, "O God, may all

⁶ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "Aurora Leigh," vol. 2, ln. 952ff., in Horace E. Scudder, ed., *The Complete Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1900), 284. A gauntlet is the heavy, metal plated glove of a knight.

⁷ George Arthur Buttrick, *Prayer* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1952), 37.

⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in Today's Global City*, Occasional Paper 16 (Birmingham: Selly Oaks Colleges, 1997).

this serve to glorify Christ and to increase the faith of my children.” That father, not a theologian, not a minister of Word and sacrament, not a college or university graduate, not a would-be Master of Divinity, but an unsophisticated layman—and investment executive of exceptional integrity and accomplishment—knew in truth, in lived truth, what cannot be grasped or argued to clarity in the abstract, namely, “that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” And so the martyrs knew, martyrs so called not simply because they died, but because they died as they lived in testimony to the sovereignty of one who earlier had died to sin, once for all. And so other lovers of God knew when, violent decades ago, they entered the death camps at Auschwitz and Buchenwald, Belsen and Dachau, the *Shema Israel* or the Lord’s Prayer on their lips, “of whom the world was not worthy” (Heb. 11:38). And so the lovers of God knew who were killed at worship in Indonesia just five years ago, or who were slaughtered in Palestine or in Israel in any year, or who were shot dead, or bombed dead, or beheaded in Iraq just this past year, this past month.

Jesus, the gift in the gauntlet thrust in the face of our prayers knew them, each one, even if they never knew him. He was their hope even if they never called upon God in his name to save them. And God’s “effectual calling” of you and me into service to the gospel means that we are to make that hope known. “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” It is not a pious mantra to quiet still further an all-too-untroubled spirit. It is a shout, a call to contest, a gauntlet tossed into the teeth of our questions, our doubts, our prayers, “a gauntlet with a gift in’t.” And whether you have chosen to take up that gauntlet or not, it is yours as it is mine, and we will join the contest it demands that the love of God may be satisfied.

Our baptism signals the truth of it: “Whom God calls, God keeps ever as his own, against [all] odds, however great, for who or what can withstand God? [Yet] the greatest assurance of this tenacious love is the sacrifice of Christ to which believers are joined through sufferings incurred [in] fidelity to the Crucified.”⁹ That is your challenge and mine from God himself, to bear each day the scandal of the cross, to live every moment under the sovereign sway of Christ Jesus crucified, risen, regnant, whatever comes of it.

⁹ Charles L. Bartow, “Romans 8:26–39,” in Roger E. VanHarn, ed., *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday’s Texts: The Second Readings: Acts and Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 94.

the broken hopes of the body politic, ecclesial, national, and international. To rework a thought by John Calvin from his commentary on our text: All things which happen to the saints are so overruled by God, that what both the world, and perhaps the saints themselves, regard as inconsequential, the issue shows to be of greatest consequence.¹³ So it was with Jesus at Calvary. And so it may be with us here, this morning, two weeks to the day after our national remembrance of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and just after the beginning of a new year, right at the start of a new semester's worship and study, conversation and recreation, days after the inauguration of the nation's president, and just a bit over a month before the inauguration of our seminary president. "All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose," all things, including these things—these holy and ordinary means of grace, to which, if we would be free to love God, we are bound, and wherewith we are made holy—Word and sacrament and prayer.

Let Us Pray:

In the cross of Christ we glory, O God, for it is there that we love you according to the manner of your love for us. There we know your Son as gift in the gauntlet thrust in the face of our prayers. There we know the meaning hidden in the heart of sorrow, disappointment, and grief. There we know that all things work together for good for those who love you, who are called according to your purpose. For your name's sake, grant that what we know may be evident in what we do and in what we say, day by day; that ever, and in everything, with thanksgiving to you, we may be to the praise of your glory; through Jesus Christ your Son, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

¹³ John Calvin, "The Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans," *Commentaries*, vol. 19, trans. & ed. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 315.