

Anglican bishop and New Testament scholar N.T. Wright translates Romans 8:28 a little differently than does our NRSV. Rather than “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God,” he translates it this way: “In everything, God works for good with those who love him.”<sup>i</sup>

Let’s take a moment to absorb this. In the NRSV translation, the phrase “all things” is the subject, and the sentence tells us these things work together for good for those who love God – the things seem to be bringing about the good. In Wright’s translation, the subject is God working with us for good. God with us is bringing the good.

I’m not a Greek scholar as Wright is and as are those who translated the NRSV. But based upon my knowledge and experience of God, Wright’s translation makes a lot more sense to me. Things don’t do work for good. They don’t have that power. God, however, does have the power. We know from other experiences with God that God often works through us to bring about change. So God’s working for good with those who love him (us) seems to me to be spot-on.

So, if in all things, God works for good with us, then God is working good with us now – in this pandemic, in this time of upheaval in our country. The call to us then is to pray and watch to see where God is leading us to work with Him. We did that with Love Rising -- we discerned that God calls us to pray. We are doing it in our phone outreach to our members. We are doing it in our work

toward the hybrid service. With this massive pandemic and all this unrest, I sense that God may be calling us to many, many things – some small, some life-transforming. In the pandemic and upheaval, God is continuing to reveal to us how we are to be the church now and in the future.

Sam Wells, a parish priest and guest professor of ethics at King's College in London has written a book entitled "Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics." In it, he talks about how the church might become a community of trust so that it can counter the changing world without fear. He uses the concept of improvisation in theater as a metaphor for how the church can be faithful to the Gospel in this world it cannot control.<sup>ii</sup>

One concept he deals with is that of "givens" vs. "gifts." We typically think of "givens" as being death and taxes. But, according to Wells, the only real given is that God loved the world so much that God sent Jesus to die for us and to rise again on the third day. Because of these actions, we don't have to fear death, or the penalty of sin, or even be anxious about everyday things such as whether we are loved or appreciated. God's love and God's conquering of evil are "givens."

"Gifts" in Wells' way of thinking are everything else. Our mortality is a gift, paying taxes is a gift, COVID-19 is a gift; the unrest is a gift. Our call then is to consider these gifts and what we are to do with them in light of the "given."<sup>iii</sup> This definition of gifts and givens might sound a bit strange – COVID-19 a gift? But, we may have had the

experience of receiving a gift that wasn't quite what we expected, that we may not even really like, and trying to figure out what to do with it. We are polite to the giver – we thank them – and then we try to figure out what good can come out of this gift – do we give it to the church store or to our friend who needs it or if it's a book we don't think we'd like do we read it anyway?

One Christmas, I asked for a specific yoga DVD. Instead, I got a different yoga DVD – not the one I wanted and not one I'd ever heard of. It was essentially a stretching video. I thanked the giver and took it home and moped about it for a while. Then I figured I may as well try it. That DVD is the most used DVD I own. I love it. In fact, I love it so much I've worn it out and need to get another one. One of the stretches in that DVD I didn't want makes my lower legs so agile that I can do a lot of things with my bad knee that I would never have dreamed I could do.

We weren't expecting COVID-19, and we don't want it in our lives. We're probably, in some form or another, moping about it. Unlike my yoga DVD, we won't ever learn to like it. But, it is a gift, and now we must consider how we will work with God to bring good out of this "gift." What many things significant, small, and potentially life-changing is this community called to do with God that will forever transform us and the world? To know these answers, we'll need to pray and share and discern together.

God will help us. With God working with us, we've got this.

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<sup>i</sup> The Right Rev. N.T. Wright in *God and the Pandemic*, pp 38-55

<sup>ii</sup> The Rev. Jason A. Fout, PhD in “How Do We Live As God’s Church Now” quoting Sam Wells

<sup>iii</sup> Fout quoting Wells