

**Farewell Reflections**  
**Part 2 – The Present**

**Romans 8:18-30**

Two weeks ago I shared the first of my last three messages with you. It focused on the past. Today we look at the present and in two weeks we will conclude by examining the future.

There is an old adage that says, “Nothing is certain except death and taxes.” I always thought Benjamin Franklin said it, which he did in a letter he wrote in 1789. But this week I learned that some 50 years prior to Franklin, Daniel Defoe said it in his book *The Political History of the Devil*. Here’s the thing though – the adage is wrong. There are lots of things in life that are certain besides death and taxes. For example, we all have a past, a present, and a future. The issue is not that we have them, but what we do with them.

Clearly, the past, present, and future are linked together. I said two weeks ago that we learn from the past to inform the present, which can determine something of the future. Nineteenth century Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard said it better when he opined, “Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forward.”

This morning I want us to think about how we live in the present with an eye to living forward. The present is more important than either the past or the future. That is not a profound statement. It is obvious. The past holds for us wonderful experiences and memories. We can also recall our times of desperation, pain, and sorrow. If we work at it, we can learn from both the good and the bad. While we can especially reminisce about the past, we also spend time imagining our future. We think about new directions in life with its attendant new experiences.

Here’s the problem, though. Far too much of our time is spent in the routines of the present. We get bogged down in the mundane, oftentimes to a degree that we lose sight of the future altogether. We get up at the same time most every day, get the kids off to school, go to work by the same route, do the same thing every day, come home, eat dinner, plop down and watch television. We may think about the future, but it is more wishful thinking of an easier, happier life somewhere, sometime down the road, but we really don’t know how or when we’ll get there. On and on the days, weeks, months, and years pass.

Our lives must have meaning. We need to take another look at the present, at each new day. We must see beyond the apparent surface meaning of the everyday activities that constitute the great majority of our daily routines. If we can take a fresh look at our day-in-and-day-out activities and see the true content of the tasks that compel our attention, then we will see the real meaning in them. And that will alter our outlook not just on the present, but also for the future.

Let me put it another way. Success is a journey, not a destination. Happiness is found along the way, not at the end of the road, because when the journey is over it is too late. The time for happiness is today, not tomorrow. If our attitude is one of taking each day as a new day to be experienced in deeper and more meaningful ways, then the present will be more enjoyable and the future to come will have far more potential for happiness as well.

The apostle Paul had a lot to say about all of this. He poetically endows creation with human attributes. He says that all of creation suffers and yearns for the power of human sin to be broken with the coming of the glory of God.

Paul opens this passage at verse 18 with these words: “I consider that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” This hits close to home for all of us, because we know about suffering in the present time. All of us have problems of one degree or another. Some have money problems. While showing signs of starting to turn around, the economy is still down. There isn’t any disgrace in having financial struggles. When he was young and impoverished, Pablo Picasso kept warm by burning his own paintings. Mozart was so poor that he was unable to buy wood to heat the shabby room in which he lived. He sat with his hands wrapped in woolen socks to keep

them warm, while he composed the music that was to make him great. Mozart died of consumption at the age of 35, his vitality sapped by constant hunger, cold, and lack of proper nourishment.

Some have health problems, some money problems, some family problems. Sometimes we are alone and lonely. We have problems at work and at school. We may be unhappy about our appearance, or we are hurting with the heartache of a broken relationship, or we are grieving over a loved one who is no longer with us. There isn't one single person in this sanctuary who doesn't have problems of some kind.

This passage, though, is not about problems. It's about hope! In verses 19 and 20 Paul writes: "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.....in hope....." This passage is about positive expectations. It's about the Creator God who is at work bringing order out of chaos, joy out of pain, and character out of conflict.

Paul paints here a magnificent picture of a world in which hope is triumphant. The good news is that we can live in the light of that hope today. So, what does it mean to live in hope? It means, first of all, not to shut the door prematurely on the possibility of a favorable outcome to our problems. Too often we sit back and view a situation as if the outcome is already decided. If the doctor tells us that only one person in ten comes back from a certain kind of surgery, we assume we will be one of the nine who don't make it. Why not assume that we will be that tenth person who does make it? Somebody has to be. Why not us? Why not assume the best for ourselves? And if we don't make it, all the worry in the world won't help. In fact, worry will inhibit our chances. There is significant clinical evidence that says our physical bodies respond to hope. We know we can worry ourselves sick. We can also believe ourselves into better physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being.

We may not be able to control our circumstances, but we can control the effect they have upon us. How do we do that? We do it by entrusting them to the One who loves us enough to give us his own Son in our behalf. Only then do we find the resources to make it through difficult times.

All of this is leading up to just one point that I want to make with you – everything I have said is also true of the church. The church is an organism that can also dwell in the past; it can also become mired in the present without any vision for the future. The church can tread water, tiring itself out without going anywhere, or it can collectively swim into the future. This image comes from a member of this church and it is a wonderful, descriptive metaphor. When I first came to CCUMC this person told me that just before Wally Finley came back to be your interim pastor, the church was drowning; it was under water, gasping for life. Wally, assisted by Richard Lyon, soon brought the church back to the surface of the water. Since then, this member said, the church had been treading water. Its head was above the water, but it was getting tired and it wasn't going anywhere. My response to him was to say, "Well, I guess then it's time for the church to start swimming."

And so you have, with a Michael Phelps style of commitment. Today you have a Church Council that has completed a visioning process and set the goals towards which you, the church, will swim. We have a brand new Missions Committee that is going to help you move out into the world, serving God's people in new places and in new ways. The United Methodist Women is still a vital organization serving in mission and serving its members in study. You have a second children's Sunday school class allowing more age appropriate Christian teaching. And, you are coming together weekly as the church family to worship with more vitality and more hope. These things are not of my doing – they are of your doing. The old guard has held fast and the new guard has stepped up and into leadership positions. The only thing I have done is to encourage you to start swimming. My joy has been to run alongside the edge of the pool of life and continue to cheer your success. Remember what I said at the beginning – success is a journey, not a destination.

To be sure, you have had your struggles. At times you have groaned and gasping for breath, not knowing what was coming next. But you held on, because you had hope. Today, you are alive, you are well and the future of this church is bright. Please continue to live today as a church as fully as you live your individual lives. Make every day in the church matter. Make every day in your own life matter.

Trust in the Spirit to help you in your weakness as Paul says (v. 26), and trust when he says, “For in hope we were saved” (v. 24). Finally, for the present, as well as for the future, hold dear Paul’s words in verse 28: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” As the people of God in this church, there isn’t anything that you can’t do to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world and to serve God’s people inside the sanctuary and beyond. When we say Amen, we are saying, “It shall be so.” Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 12 February 2012