

**Pentecost-10-a2008**

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**Romans 8.12-25**

First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

July 20, 2008

On Tiptoe

For the creation waits with eager longing...

–Romans 8.19

Let us pray: In all that we say and do, may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen. (Congregation is seated.)

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Anticipation. We have before us this morning a wonderful text about anticipation. “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God...” (Romans 8.19) The whole creation, the whole earth *waits* for God to act in a new and redemptive way. Anticipation.

My favorite interpretive reading of this verse has always been the rendering given by J.B. Phillips in the popular 1950’s paraphrase, *The*

*New Testament In Modern English*: “The whole creation is on tiptoe to see the wonderful sight of the [children] of God coming into their own.” On tiptoe. Phillips gives us a wonderful visual image to attach to this passage.

Standing on tiptoe. It is a classic pose of anticipation. Pictures come to my mind. I think of standing at Gate A-1 at Bradley International Airport (back when you could actually walk out to the gates!). Craning my neck, I’m up on tiptoe to see over the people in front of me. People start coming off the plane. I can’t wait that extra three seconds to catch sight of my parents who are coming to visit. I think of my once in a lifetime visit to the Masters standing back in the crowd getting up on my toes to see Fred Couples—who I played against in high school in Seattle. I think of my son John, watching a baseball game at Fenway, craning his neck to see the out at first base. (John G-K tells me that a literal translation of this passage would be “elongating its neck.”) In our English idiom: standing on tiptoe.

The posture of faith is, in large part, a kind of standing on spiritual tiptoe. We wait expectantly for something, someone we can't quite see clearly. We lean forward, stretch up, reach out in hope. As a people almost perpetually on tiptoe, our posture may look odd to the rest of the world. What are those Christians looking for? Why don't they stand flat on the ground like the rest of us?

Standing on tiptoe is a great image for the anticipation and expectation that is built into the best Christian theology. (The professors call this anticipation "eschatology," but we won't get into that!). But we must exercise due caution with this poetic image. We should not let the logic of the image itself break it away from the context of the Bible passage. It is, after all, a *paraphrase*, not a *translation*, of what the Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans.

Taken by itself, without the surrounding verses, this image of standing on tiptoe can become too sentimental and cute. The devoted son standing at the airport. The devoted fan in the gallery. The Norman

Rockwellesque family awaiting the parade down Main Street USA. The Letter to the Romans, thank God, is about more than this.

Sentimentality will not speak to our historical or life situation. A merely feel-good doctrine of hope will be too fragile to engage a world torn by war, or an urban culture of violence, or even the everyday bumps and scrapes of life within a family, or a job, or even a church. We need something strong and realistic, but still evocative and hopeful.

Paul's imagery of anticipation is not presented in a pastel-colored Sunday School handout. Here is the verse before it: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us." The sufferings of this present time. That is the ground upon which Christians are called to rise up on tiptoe. Not some pretend place where everything is nice and easy. The sufferings of this present time. Paul uses other words that remind us of the difficult nature of Christian existence in the world: bondage, decay, groaning, patience, redemption.

As Christians we do stand on tiptoe. We do wait with wonderful anticipation. But we are also aware, painfully aware that we look for God and wait for God because life without God is too terrible to bear:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. –Romans 8.22-25

Left to ourselves, we will soon lose any predilection to hope, any strength to pull ourselves up on tiptoe. But we are promised help, even help as we wait. The passage continues past today's concluding verse: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."

Looking around, we see terrible pain. We see terrible hatred. We see the suffering of innocents. And yet, the Spirit of Christ gently pulls

us up, extends our vision, and bids us stand on tiptoe that we might see beyond our present sufferings.

Try it. The view is amazing!

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Let us pray: We wait with anticipation, O Lord. We extend our necks. We stand on tiptoe. We climb the nearest mountain to look over the edge. Sharpen our vision. Increase our commitment. Grow our hope. Amen.