

Synergy  
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Imagine a garden. More specifically, imagine that you are in a vegetable garden at an organic farm in Devon, England. It's very green – both literally and ethically speaking. It is a family farm, started by a couple in the early 1950s and now run by their 5 children, with grandchildren amongst the many farm workers. It has changed and grown over the years, adding dairy, meat and baked goods to the mix. My time there, just over a week ago, was magical. Because of attention to the soil, commitment to avoid pesticides and destructive cultivation practices, because of hard work, one can wander in a field and pick a bit of purple mustard greens, taste it, and then plan how to combine it with potatoes for the evening meal. It seems idyllic, at least when the weather is good on a summer day. But the idyll did not just happen. It took an intentional ethical stance and hard work. The farm's ethical stance or mission statement is "To give a fair deal to farmers, customers, staff and the environment." Both physical processes (the interaction of soil, water, weather, cultivation) and social processes (the interactions of people who grow and people who eat) came together to make the idyll. It's synergy: more than the sum of its parts.

Imagine a prison. More specifically, imagine a Gestapo prison in Berlin at the end of December, 1944. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor, theologian and writer, is writing a poem in his cell. It turns out that it will be his last poem. A long and winding road led him from an academic career to resistance to and imprisonment by the Nazi regime. At a time when the state protestant church was compromised by association with the government, Bonhoeffer was active in the "Confessing Church": a movement of religious resistance that was declared illegal. Like many resisters, Bonhoeffer walked a dangerous path, taking employment with the German military intelligence, as a way to work against the government from the "inside." He was arrested when the full scope of his involvement with the resistance and efforts to overthrow Hitler was discovered. His imprisonment lasted 18 months, during which time he wrote many letters and acted as pastor to other prisoners. He was executed in April 1945, shortly before the end of the war. On that dark and gray day at the close of his last year, he wrote the poem that will be our second hymn: "By Gracious Powers So Wonderfully Sheltered." In light of his situation and the tragic outcome, a poem about God's sheltering love might seem odd or deluded. One could say that the synergy of his times was working against this imprisoned pastor: that he was born into a setting that called forth his determined or even reckless expression of faith and witness. In his situation, he could not separate the political from the spiritual. This was a "perfect storm," a crisis or crucible where spiritual integrity could mean the end of physical life. Bonhoeffer's faith led to his own death, but not before seeds were planted. His words and his story live on, a synergy of their own: more than the sum of their parts.

Jesus told his disciples to imagine. That's what parables are about: teasing our minds into creative imagination. Imagine a field where both weeds and wheat grow together – how should the farmer handle that potentially dangerous synergy? Imagine a tiny seed that grows into a huge shrub and then a tree: a seed that mysteriously grows big enough to house birds? Imagine the way a woman uses yeast and flour – the synergy of living and inert matter – to produce bread for a

multitude. Imagine a net big enough and fine enough to catch fish of every kind. In other words, try to imagine the Kingdom of Heaven, the synergy of human and divine, of mundane and outrageous, of political and spiritual, of useful and awe-inspiring. Imagine this Kingdom as subversive, overwhelming, lavish, insistent, and a matter of life and death.

We cultivate the spiritual discipline of imagination, this exploration of synergy, because we know that we will need it. Just as an athlete prepares for upcoming challenges and achievements through physical exercise, we Christians prepare for richer and more abundant life by stretching our imaginations. Then, in idylls and in prisons, we are able to sense the “gracious powers” that surround and uphold and embrace us.

Imagination, of course, can only take us so far. Your present situation in life may feel as though you are living in a garden, with its purposeful work and blessings...or it may feel like a prison, with its challenges, threats, and limitations. At moments you may feel convicted of God’s sheltering and gracious power, while at others you may despair of ever feeling that sense of divine blessing. To those in crisis, the apostle Paul speaks strongly and clearly, a lifeline of certainty: “We know that all things work together” (there’s that word *sunergei* in Greek)...”We **know** that all things work together for good for those that love God, who are called according to his purpose.” Paul was not speaking of idylls or gardens or comfort or prosperity. He was talking about the love of God, working in and through many circumstances, within and without our control: the love of God, subversive, overwhelming, lavish, insistent, and a matter of life and death.

In this powerful reading from his letter to the Romans, Paul goes on to insist and clarify: “If God is for us, who is against us?” and no earthly or spiritual thing “can separate us from the love of God.” These are the words that allow us to imagine the world as a garden suffused with God’s love, and inspire us to care for it. These are the words that allowed Bonhoeffer to imagine a world without tyranny, and inspired him to die for it.

Let’s let our imaginations rest for a minute, and allow our minds to look at today, and here, and now. We are sitting in a church, not on an organic farm or in a prison. Jesus spoke about seeds and fish; Paul wrote about “hardship, distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword, about death, life, angels, rulers, things present, things to come, powers, height, depth, and anything else in all creation. That sounds pretty comprehensive, but our language of deep concern may be different. Illness, cancer, divorce, grief, aimlessness, a failed career, bankruptcy, depression...what would you add? What seems to separate you from the love of God? What has put you beyond the pale ...or God beyond the pale, for that matter?

When our imaginations fail us, and reality oppresses us, the community of faith serves as the vehicle for holy synergy. We assert that we are more than the sum of our parts. We take note of the passages of life and claim the presence of God in them. We try to live with integrity and to work for the justice and liberation that God proclaims. We say ‘No’ to violence and greed. We plant tiny seeds that others will water. We invest in fields of hidden treasure for the future.

In 1928, when he was a young man, long before Hitler came to power, Bonhoeffer preached a sermon titled “God is With Us.” He said, “From baptism to the grave, the word of the church accompanies us, places us under the assurance of the word: ‘Remember, I am with you.’ As a symbol of this situation, the church places the decisive stages of a person’s life under the church’s own proclamation.” There was no way that that young preacher could know what was ahead – the

decisions, the suffering, the imprisonment and the kind of death. There is no way that he could know that the church into which he was ordained would not remain his spiritual home – that “church” would take on a whole new meaning as small groups of condemned men gathered to pray in prison cells. Can we really say that all things worked together for good for Bonhoeffer as he was called according to God’s purpose? Perhaps one can never say that about another person, but only claim it for oneself, as he did.

Today, I ask you whether you can find a way, through imagination, or prayer, or Scripture, or the love of your community to make that claim for yourself. To say that God is for you. To say that there is a synergy, mysterious and compelling, working in your life. To say that nothing can or will separate you from the love of God. And further, to accept the calling that comes with the claim: a calling to make gardens out of wastelands, to resist the destruction of the environment, to protect children from violence, to advocate for peace. When all things work together for those blessings, we will truly sense that God is for us.

As I said, we will be singing a translation of Bonhoeffer’s last poem as our next hymn. In some ways, there is some hubris in our doing this, living as we do in such different circumstances. When he writes of the “cup of bitter suffering,” how can we even grasp the depths of his distress? Once again, imagine. Imagine your own confident waiting, your own frightened soul, your own joyful memories, keeping company with his. Imagine the way that people of faith are bound together, so that we share joys and sorrows, a holy company of saints and seekers. And so we sing for the ones who are voiceless, and so we live for those who are gone. Amen.

*By gracious powers so wonderfully sheltered,  
And confidently waiting, come what may,  
We know that God is with us night and morning  
And never fails to greet us each new day.*

*Yet is this heart by its old foe tormented,  
Still evil days bring burdens hard to bear;  
O give our frightened souls the sure salvation  
For which, O Lord, You taught us to prepare.*

*And when this cup You give is filled to brimming  
With bitter suffering, hard to understand,  
We take it thankfully and without trembling,  
Out of so good and so beloved a hand.*

*Yet when again in this same world You give us  
The joy we had, the brightness of Your sun,  
We shall remember all the days we lived through,  
And our whole life shall then be Yours alone.*