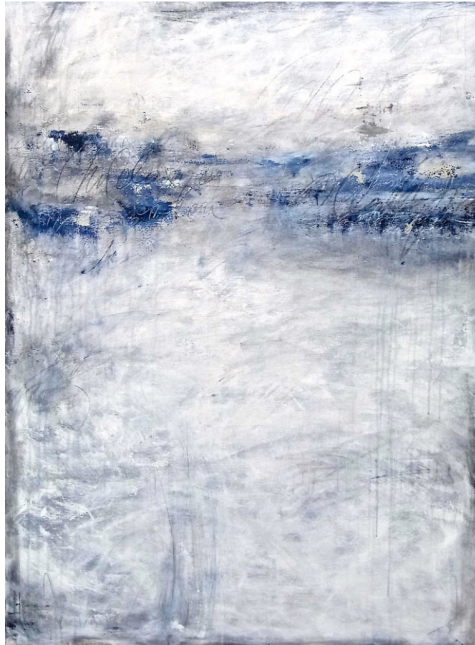


How to Find the Silver Lining *by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle*



"Silver Lining"

Prayer of Illumination

Lord God, we believe. Help our unbelief.
Amen.

Scripture: Romans 8:28; 35-39 (NRSV)

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

*"For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."*

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – How to Find the Silver Lining

Sebastian Junger in his best-selling book *“Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging”* talks about when the city of Sarajevo was besieged for nearly four years in the 1990s during the Bosnian War. The atrocities and destruction were horrific.

Junger came back to Sarajevo twenty years later to interview those who survived. He heard this over and over:

*“Whatever I say about the war,
I still hate it, but I do miss something of the war.”*

In one neighborhood, five apartment buildings that contained about sixty families came together during the siege.

Vegetable gardens were planted and the families all ate of the food they cultivated. Water was gathered and boiled from roof gutters.

One young woman was given an egg by a neighbor on her eighteenth birthday. She didn't know what to do with it because she wanted to share it with her friends. She ended up using the egg to make pancakes so her friends could join her.

Junger told of another story of a seventeen year old who sustained a serious leg injury from shrapnel when the war broke out. After six months her mom figured out an improbable way to get her daughter out of Sarajevo to Italy so she could heal from her life-threatening injuries. Although she got better in Italy, she soon became lonely and depressed away from home. She was afraid if her family died, she would be left all alone. She missed the closeness and love of family. She decided to go back into the war zone to be with her family. Even though it was even harder to get back into Sarajevo, her mother found a way. (Go mom!!!)

Sebastian Junger asked her:

Were people happier during the war?

Her reply:

We were the happiest...and we laughed more.

During the war they learned to share and care for each other. And in easier times, those lessons of war were soon forgotten.

Immanuel, let's not miss, waste, or forget the silver linings of the coronavirus pandemic. Keep squinting and straining your eyes for the silver lining.

Now don't get me wrong here—nobody wants a pandemic. We didn't choose it and we don't want it. The loss of lives is sobering. The economic toll on businesses and families is terrible. These stressors and the loneliness of sheltering in place have contributed to increased addictions and suicides. Church sanctuaries are closed. Schools have closed. Graduation ceremonies cancelled. Visitors and

family aren't allowed in hospitals or nursing homes to be with loved ones. Our schedules have been upended and our routines inconvenienced.

There are things that we enjoyed in the past, that we'll probably no longer ever be able to enjoy again. We have to figure out what a new normal will look like and how to get there.

And of course, dealing with the most serious fear of all—RUNNING OUT OF TP!!!

Yet there is a silver lining in all of this. We're experiencing all these things together. We too are learning about sharing. Sacrifice.

No one's exempt on the face of the planet—every human being is going through this. We're in solidarity. Connected—for better or for worse.

We're better in touch with our mortality and fragility. Nothing's guaranteed. We're all having to live in limbo land—it's the status fluxus. We're taking things and people less for granted. Any time you see someone—it's special. We ask about each other's families more. The virus has caused us to think more of the most vulnerable. Each day is a gift.

We're also savoring a slower pace and enjoying more of that strange and magical thing called sleep. Our homes used to be pit stops and way stations—now the home is a place where families dwell together. We even eat together now!

People are getting out more and enjoying God's creation. Our planet has gotten a little breather from us. We're spending less on gas and commute times.

The Himalayas can be seen from India for the first time in 30 years because of the decrease of air pollution during the lockdown. The Venetian canals are crystal clear and even dolphins have been spotted swimming laps in them.

In safety circles, when something bad happens you not only do what's called a PPA—a Potential Problem Analysis, but you also do a POA—a Potential Opportunity Analysis. Rather than merely looking for problems, you also look for new opportunities that have arisen out of the problems. You take a POA-Potential Opportunity Analysis.

For example, Immanuel and countless churches around the country and the globe have been catapulted into online ministry. On their own, most would have NEVER even considered doing this. Countless Presbyterian ministers around the country are now... tele-evangelists??!!!

But with taking online ministry seriously, you're no longer limited by the confines of your city. Possibilities have extended across state and country lines.

We've been forced out of our comfort zone to learn new things. I didn't even know about Zoom three months ago. AA Meetings, counseling sessions, doctor appointments, small groups, fitness, and academic classes are online.

We're learning about sharing worship styles together—give and take. Sharing space and sharing time. Working together. It's making us more flexible and more nimble. It's not easy, but it's so good for us.

In psychology, we hear about “PTSD”—Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. This is real.

But there is also “PTG”—Post-traumatic Growth. This too is real. By the grace of God, we can experience spiritual and emotional PTG—post-traumatic growth.

Like Joseph in Genesis, we can say,

“you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.” PTG.

Or as Paul says in Romans 8,

“all things work for the good of those who love God.” PTG.

Wherever the love of God is present—there’s spiritual possibility and hope. PTG. God’s love—agape love—is the more excellent way, that paves the way, even when there’s no way.

God’s love opens up doorways for us that were previously locked, blocked, or just non-existent. God’s love is a love that never fails and always endures.

As Paul says in our passage,

God works ALL THINGS for the good of those who love God.

Notice Paul doesn’t say that our faith is in ALL THINGS. No, our FAITH is in God. Our trust isn’t in ALL THINGS. Our trust is in God.

So by the providence of God, ALL THINGS prove advantageous for our true good. ALL THINGS are profitable for our growth, maturity, and development. ALL THINGS assist us in becoming more Jesusish and less selfish. Nothing is wasted in God’s economy. God uses ALL THINGS to chisel us and fashion us and form us into the image of Christ.

This doesn’t mean that ALL THINGS serve our COMFORT. Or that ALL THINGS facilitate our CONVENIENCE. Rather, ALL THINGS CONTRIBUTE to the accomplishment of our salvation and spiritual development.

In addition to ALL THINGS, there are NO THINGS. NOTHING, NO THING, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. NOTHING.

- Not stars.
- Not the ocean depths.
- Not the mountains staring us down.
- Not viruses. Not plagues or pandemics.
- Not economic stress and hardship.
- Not the decay of time.
- Not even death or life.

Nothing. NO THING. Nada. NOTHING can separate us from the love of God.

It’s important not to mix up ALL THINGS and NO THINGS. When we’re anxious and discouraged it’s easy to get Paul’s words jumbled up, and think:

- ALL THINGS can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.
- Or NO THINGS work together for the good of those who love God.

Resist those thoughts—realign them with Romans 8!

- ALL THINGS work together for our good.
- NOTHING can separate us from the love of God.

Whatever comes against God’s work and God’s purposes—will eventually be null and void.

As Paul tells us, we’re “more than conquerors” because Christ has defeated the last enemy—death. Life and love wins.

So, through adversity:

- Our faith is deepened.
- Our character is refined.
- We’re drawn closer to God
- because we rely more on God.

Sometimes we find and see the silver lining right away, sometimes we have to wait for it—a long time. Maybe we won’t see it until the next life. But we know that eventually the silver lining will come because Christ’s destiny is our destiny.

This isn’t mere wishful thinking or naïve optimism—this is hope, a rugged and sturdy hope backed up by God’s Word.

- Hope that God is with us.
- Hope that God is guiding us.
- Hope that God is sustaining us.
- Hope that God is teaching us.

As the Scriptures say in Jeremiah:

“I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD,
“plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

And that’s how we find the ultimate silver lining that’s been there all along.

Amen.

Sermon Artwork: “*Silver Lining*” by Laura Spring, lauraspringart.com

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