

## **Methodist Sermon**

### **“The Best of Things in The Worst of Times” Romans 8:28**

**By Reverend John Thomason  
Pastor, Eustace United Methodist Church  
Eustace, TX  
Campus Minister, Trinity Valley Community College  
Athens, TX**

I read about a young man from Florida University who played in the 1995 college baseball playoffs. In a crucial game, this player homered, drove in four runs and made a key defensive play in leading his squad to victory over a higher-ranked team. What made his personal triumph all the more remarkable is that it came less than 48 hours after a great person tragedy. This young man's girlfriend had been killed when her Ford Bronco rolled over on Florida's turnpike, tore through a guardrail and dropped 25 feet into a canal. The baseball player attended the funeral mass for his girlfriend on a Friday morning, then was the hero of the game that afternoon. He said, "This was the hardest day of my life. And probably the best game of my life."

On the cornerstone of an old church in England, these words are inscribed: "In the year 1653, when all things sacred in the kingdom were either profaned or demolished, this church was built by Sir Richard Shirley, whose singular praise was to do the best of things in the worst of times."

As a pastor, I've been intrigued and inspired by individuals who respond to negative situations with positive action. They meet overwhelming adversity with amazing ingenuity. They look for ways to redeem even the most hopeless circumstances. On the "hardest days" they seem to have their "best games." Somehow they summon the courage "to do the best of things in the worst of times."

I recently served for three years as a hospital chaplain in a trauma hospital in Houston, TX. I came to identify with one of the characters in the popular television series "MASH"- the young Army clerk, Corporal O'Reilly. Of course, no one in the medical unit addressed him by his formal name. He acquired the nickname "Radar" because even in a noisy, hectic military camp he had the uncanny ability to hear helicopters from a great distance flying in with wounded soldiers.

Well, I developed "radar" of my own while serving as a hospital chaplain. Our institution had an air ambulance service called "Life Flight." From any point in the hospital I could hear the roar of the helicopter as it approached the landing pad carrying its critically ill or wounded passenger.

My "radar" was sensitive not so much to the sound of chopper as it was to the pain and suffering the chopper would bear. Patients transported by "Life Flight" were victims of every conceivable tragedy- natural disasters, industrial explosions and fires, gunshot wounds to the head (many of them self-inflicted), gruesome automobile accidents and dangerously premature births.

When I heard the dreaded sound of the helicopter, I knew I would be paged momentarily to the trauma unit, perhaps to offer a silent prayer for the patient in the mist of frantic emergency treatment, perhaps to keep vigil with the patient's family members as they absorbed the shock of the incident and vacillated between hope and despair.

Late one night I was asked by the trauma team to be with the mother and father of a teenage girl who was blind-sided in her car by a drunk driver. She had suffered irreversible head injuries and was given little chance to survive, much less to resume a normal life. As the parents poured out their anguish to me, I wept with them- in part because I, too, had a teenage daughter and felt my own vicarious anguish. Soon

the attending physician entered the waiting room and began to speak to the parents in a halting, almost apologetic, way.

He explained that they had done everything that could be done, but that their daughter's injuries were too severe to overcome. She had just been pronounced brain dead. Later the doctor added, however, that her vital organs were still functioning because she remained on a respirator. Due to this unusual combination of circumstances, it was possible for their daughter to be an organ and tissue donor. The doctor proceeded to lay out the facts about donation without applying any pressure. He then offered to address their questions and concerns and give them adequate time to reach a decision.

For the next 45 minutes, this couple, already stricken with grief, struggled to make a decision they were unprepared to make. They had never thought about organ donation, for themselves or their loved ones. Now they were asked to make a decision regarding their own beloved child in the wake of a senseless tragedy, and to make it in the crucible of crisis.

The parents were initially skeptical and suspicious. They began to raise tough, even angry questions: *Was their daughter's death being hastened so that her body could be exploited for organs?* No, the doctor replied emphatically. She was already dead by every clinical definition, and the decision to donate was entirely up to them. *Would their daughter's body be mutilated? Would it be possible for her casket to be open at her funeral?* The doctor assured them that there would be no visible signs of the surgery to remove her organs and that an open casket would indeed be possible. She would be treated with utmost dignity and respect. Even so, the mother and father recoiled at the idea that any other physical damage might be done to their daughter. "Her body has already been through so much trauma," the mother said. "I don't know if I can stand putting her through anything else. The father added, "I remember holding her as a newborn baby. I want her to go out of this world the same way she came in, with her body as intact as possible."

The girl's parents were religious people, and not surprisingly, they also raised religious questions. *Does the Bible shed any light on their dilemma? Is it possible to discern God's will in this situation? Does their own church tradition encourage or discourage organ donation?* The mother and father happened to be United Methodists like myself. I mentioned to them that our recent church pronouncements have strongly advocated organ and tissue donation as a "life-giving act." Because the technology for transplants is a recent development, the Bible is, of course, silent about this specific issue. Christ gave us the comprehensive commandment to love one another as he has loved us, but he left it to individuals to apply the law of love in particular situations. I suggested to the couple that a decision either way could be interpreted as a loving decision.

The mother and father continued to struggle aloud about their options. Then they asked to have a few minutes to talk privately and come to a conclusion. The doctor and I left the room and conferred about our exchange with the couple. We both surmised that they would reject the option of organ donation. Their heads seemed to be saying, "Donation is a good and helpful thing to do." But their hearts seemed to be saying, "Enough already! Let our daughter rest in peace."

Soon the father signaled that they were ready to talk to us again. And to our amazement they announced that they were consenting to donate their daughter's organs and tissues! I wondered to myself what caused them to overcome their caution and fear and reach a positive verdict. It wasn't necessary to ask. The mother and father proceeded to tell us why they made this choice. They viewed their daughter's death as a cruel, needless act. Nothing could make sense of it. Nothing could make her death good in and of itself. But something good could come out of it. Their daughter's death could provide the gift of life for someone else. Moreover, they decided that donating their daughter's organs would be "life-giving" not only to a needy recipient but to themselves as well. As parents they would find comfort and healing in the knowledge that their daughter's death had not been a total waste, that part of her physical self would benefit someone else on the brink of death.

As a hospital chaplain, I counseled numerous families facing the option of organ donation. Many declined to donate and I never presumed to judge their decisions. Their reasons for declining were varied.

However, those who consented to donate all voiced the same reason. In each instance they saw an opportunity “to do the best of things in the worst of times.” They believed that their loved one’s death would not have to be useless; that their own loss would somehow be transformed into someone else’s gain; that their choice to donate would bring healing and life in the midst of death.

In his epistle to the Romans, Paul makes the audacious claim that “In everything God works for good” (8:28). No matter how negative or hopeless our circumstances, says Paul, God can produce a positive result. God can always salvage something good out of something bad. For most of us, the acid test of this credo comes with death, especially a premature, tragic death. Can anything good possibly come from a death as unjust and untimely as the death of a teenage girl at the hands of a drunk driver? According to Paul, the potential for good is always there as long as God is present in our loss and sorrow, and God is always present!

But how is this potential realized? How in practical terms, does God work for good even in the bleakest circumstances of life and death? Part of the answer is that God accomplishes his work through us. We are called to become God’s partners in the salvage business. As God empowers us to “to do the best things in the worst of times,” God’s redemptive purposes are realized.

Herein lies the deepest significance of a decision to donate organs and tissues. When we are faced with the worst of times—our own death or the death of a loved one—we can choose to work with God in working for good. We can embody Christlike self-giving in the most tangible way possible. We can make our own deaths purposeful. Best of all, we can choose life for someone else. And we can make these choices **now**, while we are still able to think clearly and speak for ourselves, before we are incapacitated by crisis.

Frederick Buechner once compared the God of the Bible to the old alchemists—those ancient, primitive scientists who were always trying to take an inferior, impure material and transform it into gold. The testimony of faith is that God is able to pull it off! God can take even the worst-death itself-and somehow out of it bring the best. “In **everything** God works for good.” The wonder of it is that you and I can have a hand in this great work!

Source: SEOPF/UNOS. *Organ and Tissue Donation: A Reference Guide for Clergy*. 4th Ed. Cooper ML, Taylor GJ, eds. Richmond, VA:UNOS; 2000

