This week’s passage from our journey through the Book of Romans is another familiar section of scripture. We hear these words often at funerals and memorial services. It is easy to understand why when we consider the profound depth of the love of God for humankind, revealed in our brokenness, in our trials and tribulations, in our sorrow and grief, and even in our own death.

I am reminded of the opening words of M. Scott Peck in his classic work, *The Road Less Traveled*, “Life is difficult.” Life IS difficult. We have all experienced hurt in various forms. We all carry around residual pain simply because we are living, breathing human beings. I am becoming even more convinced that the Christian life is even more difficult. In an increasingly secular world (at least in the Western Hemisphere), almost all of Europe and an increasing amount of America is becoming “post-Christian” in nature.

Paul’s writing is to in a time where the church knew and understood persecution well. This has, for the better part of your life and mine, been a challenging concept to grasp. Our society was driven in many ways by the influence of Christianity found in businesses being closed on Sunday, and often closing early on Wednesday afternoon. Christmas is recognized as a national holiday. Prayer in schools was a long accepted practice in classrooms before lunch and before football games on Friday night. These were subtle, but significant influences that helped to shape life in the larger community in a Judeo-Christian tradition.

We know, however, that these types of expression are becoming increasingly rare throughout the US. The church cannot depend on the larger society as an entity that offer support as it did just a few short years ago. This is our new reality and rather than lament the loss of these “home field advantages” we enjoyed for all of the 20th century, the church must become more engaged in the fulfillment of our mission to make disciples, rather than believe that acculturation to the Christian life will occur through societal functions and societal blessing.

I would speculate that we, as the Church, will know persecution in increasing measure. It may not be as overt as we see recorded in Romans, as Paul recounts believers being led like sheep to the slaughter all the day long, but rather it may occur in less visible forms, such as discrimination in hiring practices with Christians not gaining employment because of their faith, or young men and women not gaining access to colleges or universities because they identify as Christian. I do hope that I am wrong, but this would not be unheard of, nor would it be the first time the church has found itself in this position.

That said, the promises of this 8th chapter take on even greater meaning, when we consider that there is absolutely NOTHING that can separate us from God’s love. NOTHING. And, while this provides a comfort that sustains us, I believe that the even more significant part of this passage is v. 28, when we consider that not only is there nothing that can separate us from God’s love, but God’s nature is to work for good in all things.

This does not mean that all things are good – we’ve lived long enough to know that there are terrible, unspeakable evils that occur on this earth. Nor does it mean that God causes these things to
occur. As one minister shared, “God gets credit for things that would get you and I put in jail!” Instead, in the midst of the difficult circumstances of life, God – because God’s nature IS love – through the Spirit – works to bring about good, even in the most challenging of circumstances. Are we always able to see this? No. Often it takes considerable amount of time in order that we might look back upon whatever occurred and only with some space and emotional clarity can we begin to see when God was present and working for good in those difficult moments.

Lance Presley, a friend and colleague of mine in the Mississippi Conference, offered a humorous way of understanding the presence of God, reveal in and through us in the community of faith, that underscores how God is both present and working for good in even the worst moments of human living and being. He described it as the handy English to Southern dictionary - Funeral Edition:

- I am sorry for your loss ---> I brought some fried chicken
- We are praying for all of you during this difficult time ---> I brought some fried chicken
- Your loved one was a great person and will be missed ---> I brought some fried chicken
- If you need anything, please don’t hesitate to call ---> I brought some fried chicken

Yes, Jesus is showing up, working for good, in the fried chicken that accompanies friends and loved ones who are bearing one another’s burdens in times of grief and sorrow.

Take comfort in the certain promise of God. Take heart that you are not alone in the midst of persecution. Take good care to be part of the community of faith and to share in this life with your brothers and sisters in Christ. Take heed to know that others around you are broken in heart, mind, and spirit, and are wondering if God is present with them. Find ways to help them to know that this is so because they will have experienced the presence of God through you.