

Nothing Can Separate Us

When last I stood in this pulpit to preach, my final words to you were, “We are saved by hope.” That was the “take-away” I hoped we would all share as we looked together at the middle section of the eighth chapter of Romans, the soaring center point of Paul’s great letter to the church at Rome. As I mentioned to you last week, Romans 8 has been significant in my life and thought since I was a very young Christian. The chapter sings with language of liberation, hope and love and it is this last attribute I want to focus on this morning. In the last third of chapter 8, Paul gives us a ringing affirmation of the love of God for us, expressed in language of Father, Son and Holy Spirit that moved theologians in later years to devise and grapple with the doctrine of the Trinity to assist in our comprehension of the incomprehensible. But while the ultimate concept of God who is Three-in-One may remain beyond our grasp, the love with which God surrounds us should not be. After all, we live in it every day.

Let me give you my own “Cliff Notes” version of Paul’s letter up to this point. Having set forth the basis of the good news, that all of humanity has sinned and fallen short of the requirements of God, yet that all of humanity is offered the salvation of righteousness by faith, Paul goes on to struggle with the reality of the power of Sin in the lives of the righteous. Paul writes to the Romans that he is as personally affected by this struggle as anyone. He, too, falls into sinful behavior, despite his best intentions. But, he reminds them, God has set those who claim the salvation of Christ free from ultimate consequences -- there is no condemnation. Instead, we are adopted into God’s family as joint heirs with Christ. Although we see the results of humankind’s sins all around us, both in the lives of people and in nature, we can rely on the hope we have of a blessed future in which all of creation, including our own bodies, are redeemed, freed from corruption into glory. Meanwhile, until the kingdom is fully come, the struggle continues.

It is at this point, filled with both hope for the future and with a clear-eyed assessment of the difficulties of the present, that Paul’s affirmation of the love of God reaches its climax. First, he reminds his readers of the partnership of the Spirit of God with the believer. Yes, we are groaning in our frustration with our inability to completely escape Sin. “Wretched men and women that we are, who shall deliver us from these bodies of death?” Yes, the whole of creation is groaning under the consequences of humanity’s selfishness and pride. But the Holy Spirit is groaning right along with us. And the Holy Spirit’s groans are not just sympathetic labor pains; they are far more effective than that. The Spirit’s groans are prayers on our behalf, prayers we cannot utter for ourselves. We hope, Paul writes in verse 25, for that which we cannot see. Since we cannot see, cannot envision, cannot even imagine the glorious future God has in store for us, how can we possibly pray it into being? Instead, the Spirit of God that dwells with and within us prays on our behalf. William Loader, an Australian theologian, puts it this way: “There is a groaning in the heart of God. We become part of it.” In God’s great love for us, God’s Spirit comes alongside us in such a way as to unite our hearts with God’s. Empowered by the Spirit, we offer up prayers that unlock not only our own best future but also the greatest good for all of creation.

As I mentioned two weeks ago, Romans 8:28 has been one of my favorite verses in the Bible for a very long time. The Greek, as is so often true in Paul’s writing, is a little tricky to translate. One translation reads, “In all things, God works together with those who love God toward the good.” This certainly seems to connect with the idea of our praying partnership with the Spirit. From the beginning, God has sought a partnership with God’s human creations in the fulfillment

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of all of creation. When humankind turned away from God, creation suffered. When humankind turns from God, creation suffers. But ultimately, Paul writes, God knew that humanity's purpose would be fulfilled. That is why we were set apart, called into being, justified and glorified. We can only understand the justification through faith and we cannot yet see the glorification. It exists for us only as hope. But for God, to whom time is just another part of creation, the glorification has already been accomplished. In his commentary on Romans, Peter Stuhlmacher wrote, "From God's perspective and according to his will, that which can only be developed and completed in the future within salvation history is already accomplished. God has so acted in Christ, once for all, that all time is and remains determined by it." The love of God, in other words, pulls us from our struggling present into the future where God's will is fully accomplished.

Paul's writing of predestination is not best understood as a time-bound chain of causality (God made me this way so that I'll do this thing) but rather as a celebration of love which reaches beyond time to make all things well. Paul writes here not as a sober systematic theologian, but as an ecstatic believer who knows the overwhelming experience of feeling caught up in God's love and God's purpose. Many of you have heard me mention the late Rev. Dr. Harold Songer, my primary New Testament professor at Southern Seminary. Dr. Songer was convinced that all of the predestination language in Paul's writings was not meant as a part of a metaphysical treatise on God's sovereignty over against human will but rather as a faithful celebration of his own life-changing experience of God's love. His advice to us students was not to get hung up in conflicting theories of predestination and free will but rather to listen to the ecstatic praise of Paul as he attempted to communicate that experience to others.

What then shall we say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? How can we question that we are beloved by God, Paul writes, when God became flesh, suffered, and died, so that we might be redeemed? What does it matter if we stand accused by the world for anything that we might do? God has already declared us innocent, wiped our slate clear of any and all sins. We see the love of God in the prayer partnership of the Spirit and in the work of the Father to create, set apart, justify and glorify us.

In case we've forgotten the beginning of this train of thought ("There is, therefore, no condemnation"), Paul repeats "Who will condemn us?" If anyone would have the right, it would seem to be Jesus, who was nailed on a cross for our behalf. In our worst moments of self-loathing, we might well imagine the ascended Christ looking down on us from the right hand of God, clucking his tongue and saying, "Look at that one there, Dad. After all I did for him, that's how he lives. Let's give up on that one." There was a bumper sticker that was popular a few years ago that read, "Jesus is coming again and boy is he pissed!" But Paul says that's wrong! That same Jesus who died, rose again, and sits at the right hand of God, pleads on our behalf with the Father who has already justified and glorified us. Court is in session and the fix is in. We're getting off scott-free.

That shouldn't really be surprising. After all, Jesus died for us to express the greatest love the world has ever known. The Gospel according to John records that Jesus said it himself, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Paul is willing to affirm that in the case of the love of Christ for humanity, love conquers all. "What shall separate us

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from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword?” These are rhetorical questions and for Paul it is clear that the answer is “No, nothing!” Paul, after all has been through all of this and come out with his life and his faith intact. Paul’s two extant letters to the church at Corinth witness this: “Even unto this present hour we both hunger, and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwelling place: being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it. We stand in jeopardy every hour. We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed. In stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.” This is a guy who knows hardship! Paul isn’t preaching the Gospel of Health and Wealth. He quotes from Psalm 44: “Yea, for thy sake are we killed all the day long; we are counted as sheep for the slaughter.” Christ’s people do not have an easy time of it in the present, either Paul’s or, in many places, ours. But still, Paul rejoices in the love of Christ. “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.”

Paul then goes on to list the forces that people feared, the potential enemies that could rip the believer from the sheltering arms of God. Some we would list today, some we might not. Some would be listed by people in some cultures and not in others. Everyone, of course, faces the vicissitudes of life and the inevitability of death. Everyone knows the troubles of today and fears the problems lurking around the corner tomorrow. For some of us, mornings are tough times of the day because we build up in our minds the obstacles and challenges that will face us during the day. We prepare ourselves for the worst, but do not dare to hope for the best. And yet, we know for the believer that hope is one of God’s great loving gifts for us. The future is not to be feared; Jesus taught “Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.” As Connie often says to me: “It’ll all be OK in the end. If it isn’t OK, it isn’t the end.”

But what about these other enemies listed by Paul? What about angels and principalities and powers? What about height and depth? Angels have certainly made a comeback in popular consciousness in recent years. It’s unlikely, though, that Paul was talking about the adorable, cherubic putti repopularized by Anne Geddes and her pictures of winged, naked, chubby babies, or even about the Renaissance winged warriors of Raphael and the rest. At the time of Paul’s writing, the Jewish belief system was well developed regarding angels. Jews believed that everything in the world had an angel: wind, snow, thunder, the seasons, even a blade of grass. Jews believed that some angels were hostile toward humanity. That’s really not so far from the belief systems of some of our Asian neighbors, or some Native American spirituality, or even the old pagan religions of Europe which have made a comeback in the guise of Wicca and other New Age philosophies. Likewise, principalities and powers refer to various types of spiritual entities with which Paul’s audience would have been familiar and which fit comfortably into some of those current outlooks. Height and depth are astrological concepts and many folks still run their lives by their star signs. Paul did not discount the power of any of these entities. He

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reminded his readers, however, that all of them were part of the created order, under the final authority of God and unable to overcome the ties of love which bind the believer to Jesus. Paul was persuaded through his own rocky experience that nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We are surrounded by the love of God, from the Spirit who unites our prayers with the will of God, to the Father who created us and will glorify us, to the Son who loved us enough to die for us. As always, the question is “How then shall we live?” For an answer, I turn, as I do so often, to the words of Jesus. The Gospel according to John records that during their last meal together, Jesus said this to his disciples: “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.” Jesus has added this to what he affirmed to the Pharisees were the greatest commandments of God: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” In response to the three-in-one love of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, we are called to offer three-in-one love ourselves: to God, to our brothers and sisters in Christ, and to our neighbors whoever and wherever they may be.

To close, I want to share with you a prayer that I think is a wonderful response to Paul’s writing of love. The prayer is from the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton:

My Lord God,

I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me, and I cannot know for certain where it will end, nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire, and I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore, I will trust in you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death, I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.