

A Message for the Whole of Our Lives

Romans 8:28-39

July 24, 2011

The danger of saying the same thing again and again is that the words lose their meaning and power. Every Sunday after our prayer of confession, one of us stands here and plays with the water of baptism while we offer what your bulletin calls an “assurance of pardon” for our sins.

Often we use the words, “who is in a position to condemn us? Only Christ – and Christ died for us, Christ rose for us, Christ reigns in power for us, Christ prays for us...” These words come straight from Paul’s letter to the Romans that we will read in a few moments.

When we stand here and repeat that ancient assurance, we are saying something about grace. Something that we should not miss, though something that we often have a hard time believing: that no matter what we do and no matter what we face, the love that God has for us in Jesus Christ will never be removed from us. Psalm 139 says it well: “where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me fast...”

Today’s scripture reading is one you have heard before, it is from the 8th chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans and it begins at verse 28. Listen with me for the word of God...

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We know that all things work together with those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.

And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all

of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

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

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.

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I would venture to say that I read this piece of scripture in about 80% of the memorial services in which I have a part.

The strength of this scripture at funerals or memorial services is its clarity and its comfort. Paul is driving home a point here. He is daring us to challenge him as he makes that point.

“What then are we to say about these things?

If God is for us, who is against us?

Who will separate us from the love of Christ?”

And the answer, of course, is no one; nothing.

I think the reason we so often read this at memorial services is because when we feel separated from the ones we love, we need to count on the fact that they are not separated from God.

When facing the finality of death, we come face to face with a question that we long to know: whether or not God's promises are true. And in this passage, Paul makes a powerful and compelling case that yes, they are absolutely true.

That no matter the hardship, no matter the barrier, no matter the difficulty – nothing...NOTHING, in all of creation...will get in the way of God's love for us in Christ.

Many times when I read this at memorial services, I can see how the words affect the congregation – especially the family of the one who has died. I know this passage helps us put one foot in front of the other; that these words provide needed closure; that they offer hope.

So I wonder what it would mean for us if we took this message outside the context of a memorial service – past the point of the graveside – and let these words inform our day to day living. What difference would that make?

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For me, the most powerful of Paul's words are the closing paragraph:

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.

I am convinced.

But how convinced are we about this when things happen like the events last week in Norway?

How convinced are we about this when trouble seems to make a home in our lives: with a difficult diagnosis, or struggles in our marriage, or unemployment, or addiction?

How convinced are we about this when, deep down, we are suspicious of this person who receives the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord; namely, us.

That maybe we've done too much to deserve God's love;
Or not enough.
That maybe we don't know enough;
Or believe enough;
Or care enough.

Are we convinced? Convinced that nothing will be able to separate us from God's love?

I suspect each of us might answer that question differently, depending on the day. That's the nature of faith – it ebbs and it flows. But what is true – no matter our conviction – is that the love that Paul describes in this passage doesn't depend on our acceptance. For if “nothing in creation” can separate us from God's love, then – as a part of creation – we cannot get in God's way, even if we want to.

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Being convinced of the good news of the gospel doesn't change God's mind – but it can change us.

If, like Paul, we are convinced, then – in the words of a commentator on this text – we can “face the future with hope and confidence, knowing that the Lord of all creation is a lord of love and that he is for, not against, us. Laid bare, [this] is the basis of our Christian confidence: the surety of grace.”¹

Here's what I noticed this week as a re-read this familiar passage: if this scripture is a source of comfort at the end of our lives, then certainly in the midst of our lives it is a source of courage.

I think about the courage it took in June of 1944 as soldiers arrived in boats at the beaches of Normandy.

I think about the courage it took in December of 1955 when Rosa Parks started the Montgomery bus boycott.²

It takes courage to face the things that are wrong in the world and be convinced that one day, they will be right. It takes courage because God does not promise that life will be without trial, or hardship, or difficulty – but only that God *will be with us* through trial, hardship, and difficulty.

More and more, I believe that being a Christian – and being the church – in our day and age is about conviction and courage. I think God counts on us to move beyond our failure of nerve that keeps us safe, withdrawn, and isolated within the realm of comfort, in order that we might participate in what God is doing in the world for the sake of God's kingdom.

¹ Achtemeier, Paul J, *Interpretation: Romans* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), p. 150.

² I think this because I read David Bartlett's commentary on Romans (*Westminster Bible Companion*).

Not everyone can be a war hero or the leader of the Civil Rights Movement, but each of us has an opportunity to practice courage.

It takes courage to forgive those who have hurt you;

It takes courage to walk beside a person in pain when you know there is nothing you can do to take that pain away;

It takes courage to use your influence to stand up for someone who doesn't have influence;

It takes courage to get involved in someone's life by helping them.

It takes courage to be in a relationship;

It takes courage to reach out to a stranger;

It takes courage to say what you think, especially when you know it is not what other people think.

But we do it because we believe that one day the world is going to look like the world that God had in mind: good, fair, just, beautiful.

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.

Friends, take heart; be comforted by God's promise to be faithful, and let that comfort lead you to be bold in the ways you respond to the grace we have all received in Jesus Christ our Lord.

As disciples of Jesus Christ and as the church of Jesus Christ, we are the witnesses to the hope God has for the world.

So have courage.

Amen.