

Romans 8:31-39

"More Than Conquerors"

At dinner one night this week, my husband was recounting a conversation that he had with a friend of ours. This friend happens to be a doctor and our son needed a reminder about how we had gotten to know him. Ultimately, I found myself telling about my experience of officiating his wedding to his third, and hopefully last wife. It was very interesting because this friend had been of the Jewish faith his whole life. But his then girlfriend was a very active Christian. Apparently, going to church with her was a deal-breaker and, before he knew what had happened, he actually became a Christian.

When I was doing their premarital counseling, we talked about his new faith. Often I will ask couples to read a book together for us to discuss that is usually about marriage or relationships. The Five Love Languages is a book I often use. When I asked this particular couple if they would be willing to read a book and see how it pertained to their upcoming marriage they said "sure". And I found myself asking them to read together the Book of Romans.

We had a very enlivened conversation at our next appointment and I believe it gave Mike a chance to really flesh out his faith. After sharing this story at the dinner table, my son asked, "Why did you choose Romans"? And I told him that I have long believed that if someone had never heard anything about God and had the opportunity to read only ONE book of the Bible, it should be Paul's letter to the church at Rome. I went on to say, "This book has helped me, more than any other, understand who God is and what he has done for me in the person of Jesus Christ."

So when I found myself at a crossroads over what to preach on today, I picked up my Bible and it fell open to its most used page. Romans 8. This passage, more than any other in Scripture explains God's plan for our salvation. Many folks use it for a lesson about predestination and our forefathers, Augustine and Calvin wrote copiously about these words, trying to help us understand this doctrine. But frankly, I wasn't up for something as tedious, complicated and – well – controversial as predestination.

And as the Holy Spirit walked with me down the path of these familiar words, I felt the assuring presence of God as my companion. These words that I love so much filled my Spiritual pitcher, which was quite empty, with not only the reminder of the need for my salvation, but the promise that God alone provides it.

Now you may be wondering why I needed such comfort in my life right now. Why I felt so drained. Well, if 1Corinthians 13 is the obligatory text for weddings, Romans 8 is THE text for funerals. And in all honesty, one of the most important pastoral privileges is to assure a family who has lost a loved one that nothing – NOTHING – can separate them from the love of God. Even death. Now since my first 15 years of ministry were spent as the Chaplain of a retirement community, I became well acquainted with these words. What better reassurance than to remind someone that the one whom they love, who has lived a long and faithful life, is now at rest with the Lord.

However, in the last month, I have officiated five memorial services. And in the span of eight days, I had to help two different families bury a young person. One was a 28 year old Blackhawk Helicopter pilot in the Navy who committed suicide. The other was a 41 year old, whom I have known for most of his life, who died suddenly and mysteriously – of causes that are still unknown.

Both families asked for, craved, the reassurance of this passage. That nothing, hardship, persecution, famine or the like can separate us from the love of God. Not even death. But even as I was reading this passage aloud in two different churches packed with mourners, God was whispering to me, "Not even LIFE will separate you from my love". Yes that's what I said. That's what Paul says. That's what God says. Neither death, NOR LIFE, nor angels, nor rulers, nor thing present, nor things to come will remove me from God's love. Neither death nor *life*.

Why? Why was God underscoring to me the word LIFE? Well friends, we all know that death is hard. But whether it is in some ways a relief because one has suffered long or a completely unexpected cross to bear, as Christians, death is a beautiful thing. Yet, even when we know someone is in a place and a presence more beautiful than we could ever imagine, we are still sad. Sad for our loss, for the empty chair, the side of the bed that remains unwrinkled, the stories that will not be told and the dreams that will not be fulfilled. Yes, death is hard.

However Paul is telling us that we can hang our hats on the promise that these two young men were carried into glory, into a place where there is no depression, no illness, no suffering, no questions. So even in our sadness, we can say, "Thanks be to God".

But life? Well, the truth is that life is often harder than death. So God reminds us that LIFE will not take us out of the presence of God's grace and love. God was telling me at the moment I was reading the words of comfort to others that he had not left me to bring this comfort alone. And God does not and will not leave even one of his children to experience life without his presence, when we seek it.

In fact, when Paul wrote, "Neither death nor life" he meant that divorce, cancer, mental illness, having to write a sermon when you think you have no words, politics, the media, addiction, broken relationships, algebra, traffic, the baby crying again so you get no sleep,

making your paycheck last until the next pay day, NOTHING IN LIFE – will separate us from God. And as I say this, I feel myself sigh. Nothing. Seriously, nothing? Seriously, nothing!

But how do we know for sure? And how can we really believe? Well, Paul's words are the closing words that are meant to offer answers to the questions that arose before the words we heard this morning. In the verses preceding this passage, Paul asks us to consider the sufferings that we experience, the way that even creation groans at our collective sinfulness. Paul also reminds us that sometimes we are so hurt or tired or sad or angry that we don't even know how to pray. And ONE verse hinges the questions on one side of the door with the reassurances that we have just heard that are on the other side. Verse 32. In fact, I will give you a minute to get a pew Bible or your iphone and find Romans 8 with me as I read this verse.

"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?"

Friends that well may be the most hopeful verse in the whole Bible. Because it is first and foremost a reminder that we cannot save ourselves. We can never be good enough, kind enough, wise enough to deserve everlasting life. And as we read these words we can cry, "Thank you God that we can't save ourselves and we don't have to!"

Because God, *in Christ*, in the life, death and resurrection of his beloved son does it all for us. God will give us everything. Patience. Wisdom. Strength. The right words. The friends who believe in us when we don't believe in ourselves. The prayers we think we cannot pray – everything else. In fact, God will even *give* us salvation.

And because life and death are so hard, Jesus Christ, on the very night when he knew he would be betrayed by one of his closest friends, then crucified - killed like a common criminal,

took the time to set the table that is before us so that we can always be reminded that we will never be separated from God's love. Neither death nor life.

Like the passage in Romans, the table reminds us that we can never earn or win our salvation. So Jesus was obedient to death, even death on a cross. And his body was broken so we could be made whole. The table reminds us that even today, as in Jesus' day, creation groans for the revealing of God's children. Yet we remain broken. And in our brokenness, every drop of blood that Christ shed on the cross is another one of our sins that has been forgiven. And we are given the cup of salvation. Grace. In death and life.

And precisely because LIFE is hard, we do not come to the table by ourselves. We come with others just like us – sinners saved only by grace. We come with those who pray for us and speak for us and comfort us and teach us and disappoint us and hurt us and forgive us. We come to receive Communion as we are **IN** Communion, the body of Christ together coming to receive the body of Christ given for us all.

And because LIFE is even harder when we leave the sanctuary of this place where we experience communion, we are also called to take Christ with us from this table into the world. To paraphrase D.T Niles in his book That They Have Life, "Evangelism (*that is the spreading of the Christian gospel, the making of disciples*) is just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread."

As Jesus followers, we are called to participate in God's work of walking alongside those who are suffering in life as their equals. We are called and empowered to reach out to the world that God so loved, the world outside our church doors, the world that may never have been to the table, the world that may not know the story of God's unconditional love in Jesus.

And above all, we are called to live and die in the knowledge that because Jesus not only conquered death for us, but because he conquered LIFE as well, that we too, are more than conquerors. Neither death nor life. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.