

8 Pentecost Yr A, 26/07/2020
Romans 8:26-39
Pastor Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson

“We are more than conquerors because of Christ’s love for us”

The apostle Paul was one of the deepest thinkers of the early church. His theology is very profound. He was not a person to waste time on trivial, superficial conversation. No. Rather, he was the kind of person to think big, deep, long and hard about the meaning of his faith in God and its implications for himself personally, as well as for all Christians. He didn’t even stop there however. He went on to think deeply about the implications of God’s love and grace for the whole creation. I think that is why, the early church, in its wisdom, included more of Paul’s writings in the New Testament than any other author. As a trained Jewish rabbi, even after his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road, he still continues to employ rabbinic teaching and writing methods in his letters. We see that in today’s text from Romans when he employs the Jewish question and answer method of teaching and writing to drive home the message of God’s love and grace in Christ Jesus.

In today’s passage, as I read and studied it, there were three things that leapt out at me: Prayer, all things working for good for those who love God, and we are more than conquerors because nothing can separate us from God’s love in Jesus.

PRAYER. Paul begins by saying that the Holy Spirit helps us to pray in our weakness. That incomparable genius and bear of a man, Johann Sebastian Bach, born at Eisenach, site of Luther’s boyhood learning, Thomaskantor and director of university music at Leipzig, father of 20, wrote one of his six great motets on themes from Romans 8, and titled it: *Der Geist Hilft unsere Schwachheit auf* (The Spirit helps us in our *weakness*)!¹ I think there were times in Bach’s life when he may have struggled in his prayer life and wondered how and what to pray. He had his share of suffering. In his lifetime his music was not always popular or

¹ Roy A. Harrisville, *Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament: Romans* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980), p. 132.

appreciated. In his personal life, his first wife died, and of his 20 children, 10 of them died before they became adults. So there was a lot of loss and I'm sure grief in Bach's life.

Bach, like Luther before him, and Luther, like the apostle Paul before him, all had their weaknesses—their sins. Those troubles, temptations, trials, sufferings and sins helped them to realize and depend upon God the Holy Spirit for help. The same is true for each one of us. There are times in our life because of our sins, troubles, sufferings and so on that we cannot pray or do not know what to pray for. Our prayer-life or lack thereof ebbs and flows, is up and down, has highs and lows because of our finite nature, which prevents us from seeing clearly at times—just like now with this COVID-19 pandemic, an unprecedented time, and only the GOOD LORD knows what the outcome of it will be. Thanks to the Holy Spirit who is our Intercessor praying for us! The Holy Spirit's prayers, Paul tells us, keep us connected to God's will for us. I don't know about you, but I find that very comforting and encouraging!

That leads us to the second emphasis: WE KNOW THAT ALL THINGS WORK TOGETHER FOR GOOD FOR THOSE WHO LOVE GOD, WHO ARE CALLED ACCORDING TO HIS PURPOSE.

Notice Paul does not say "only a few things work together," nor does he say "only the easy and peaceful things work together." No. Rather, he says "all things work together." These words of Paul remind me of the time when I was serving as pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in Medicine Hat. It was a sad time for me as their pastor as well as the members of the congregation. Every congregation has a history. The history of Grace was coming to an end and we had to close the church doors. In that process, we all shared our sorrow and grief. Yet, one of the healing things we agreed to engage in—which turned out to be a good thing—was to create a last will and testament. One of the recipients was Medicine Hat College. We donated seed money to create a chaplaincy ministry at the college. In due time, a chaplain was chosen and one of the programs that was introduced was a soup meal

for the students. This idea became so popular that it spread to Augustana Campus, which now has a weekly soup supper. From Augustana, I understand that the idea has also spread to the U. of A. Campus in Edmonton. So, as you can see, all things do work for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose—even when those things can come out of times of sadness, grief and loss.

That leads us into our third emphasis: WE ARE MORE THAN CONQUERORS BECAUSE NOTHING CAN SEPARATE US FROM THE LOVE OF GOD IN CHRIST JESUS. In order to drive home Paul's message, he employs the Jewish teaching method of asking questions and answering them. The series of questions that Paul asks in this text are meant to be rhetorical, and the answers, for people of faith are hopefully obvious. I think what Paul is doing here is providing words of encouragement, confidence and hope to the church in Rome—a church that was most likely experiencing persecution, where many Christians were martyred for failing to worship Caesar as a god.

Paul, I think writes with the utmost confidence that God is for us; that no one can succeed in bringing any charges against God's elect since God is the one who makes us righteous by justifying us; no one can condemn us because of the saving work of Jesus who died for us on the cross and who defeated death by his resurrection; and who in his heavenly seat is our Perfect Intercessor.

From there, Paul asks who can separate us from the love of Christ? The word separate here can also be translated divorce. Again his Jewishness comes out by quoting Psalm 44:22, a psalm of lament, which ends with confidence in the abiding presence of God's steadfast love even in times of suffering and persecution.

Paul then reaches the crescendo of this beautiful Romans symphony by confidently stating that we are more than conquerors because nothing in all of creation can separate, can divorce us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Paul himself knew this truth because he himself had experienced it—in his ministry he had been run out of town, beaten,

shipwrecked, and faced many a hardship for the sake of preaching the gospel. Through it all, Paul did not lose faith in God; nor did he abandon his calling to follow Jesus wherever he led him. In fact, through it all, he grew in his faith closer to Christ and depended more on him for strength to carry out his missionary work.

Like Paul, we too are more than conquerors. The Greek word is ὑπερνικῶ - hypernikao, it literally means "over-victor," or as we would translate it, "victory over." When I think of a conqueror, I think of wars won and empires growing more powerful. However, wars won and powerful empires don't last forever—new wars are started and lost, and empires inevitably fall sooner or later. In contrast to world history, Paul has a much larger vision of God being in control of all history leading it to its final consummation. God's perfect kingdom will eventually come in all of its fullness. When it does, thanks to the death and resurrection of Jesus, we are and will be more than conquerors because as conquerors we will live forever, eternally with our LORD in his perfect realm.

We are more than conquerors through Christ who loved us. His love is more powerful than anything or anyone else. We don't have to live in fear; we, like Paul, can be confident that God is in control—even during this COVID-19 time when there is a lot of uncertainty about the future. Nothing, not even COVID-19, can separate us, can divorce us from God's love in Jesus. Hopefully, like Paul, the sufferings, hardships, trials, temptations and whatever else will make us stronger in our faith in Christ.

Thanks to God's love and grace in Christ we are connected; we are united; we are bound to him eternally. That connection is like a healthy, loving marriage of husband and wife, the two become one. So live your life with confidence, be encouraged and encourage one another because nothing can separate; nothing in all of creation can divorce us from God's love in Jesus!