

SECOND LESSON Romans 8:26-39

The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

²⁸We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of the Son of God, in order that the Son might be the firstborn within a large family. ³⁰And those whom God predestined God also called; and those whom God called God also justified; and those whom God justified God also glorified.

³¹What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³²The very Son of God was not withheld, but was given up for all of us; will God not along with the Son also give us everything else? ³³Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who 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. ³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through the one who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor 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.

L: Word of God. Word of life.

C: Thanks be to God.

Grace to you and peace from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Normally I would include the Gospel reading for this Sunday, but I'm not preaching from the gospel this week because the second reading from Paul's letter to the Romans is one of my very favorite passages in the whole bible.

First, notice that this whole reading starts with the words, "Likewise." A term of comparison. What exactly is Paul saying that this particular topic is "like"? So, we're going to need to get a bit of a running start to understand what's going on in today's reading.

This is not a burdensome chore for me because the entire 8th chapter of Romans is probably my favorite single chapter in the Bible. From the very first verse - *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.* - this chapter speaks powerful promises to God's people. No condemnation. Period. How sweet is that!!! Near as I can tell, we tend to catastrophize the future, especially these days. When we cannot resolve the situation we find ourselves in this life, our imaginations can take us to some pretty dark places.

But in the very first verse of this chapter, there is a promise given that the ending is already clear. No condemnation for those who are in Christ! It's as if we're playing poker and God has tipped his hand...and it's a good one, especially for us!

There is another gem starting at the 14th verse:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ...

We have been given a spirit of adoption and a God whom we may boldly call, Abba, Father. No longer slaves but beloved children!! Yay!!!

There is, however, a caveat given at the end of this passage: —*if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.* And we were doing so well with all of the unconditional love and acceptance. Now this?!? Does this mean that it's not true *unless* we suffer with Christ? That seems to fly in the face of everything Paul has said up to this point.

What if this weren't a condition to be met before the promises are real for us. Isn't it possible that Paul is simply explaining how it will go for us, now that we share in the Spirit of Christ? When you abide in that Spirit, your heart will simply lead you to willingly suffer for Christ's sake and for the sake of all those he loves. I believe that what Paul is saying here is that the suffering we do with Christ is a consequence not a condition to be met. When you follow Christ and abide with him and God's people, your heart will begin to become more and more conformed to the heart of Christ. What grieves Christ will grieve you; what sparks joy in Christ will also spark joy in you.

After saying this thing about suffering with Christ, Paul continues by saying: *“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.* So first a word about suffering.

A couple of years ago, on Father’s Day, a month after Vicki had received the diagnosis of stage 4 pancreatic cancer, I came home from church and was in a state. I was in such a foul mood that I didn’t know what to do with myself. All of the kids and grandkids were going to be there in an hour or so, and I didn’t want to spew my bile all over them. I told Vicki about this and I said that if I had more time, I would take a bike ride. She told me to take one anyway. I said that I only had an hour. She told me I better get a move on.

So, I got on my gear, put my backside in the saddle and started to peddle. Hard. Angry. I was riding angry. I rode a mile and a half to a nearby lake. It was just over 2 miles around the lake and I rode it fast. It was well over 100 degrees according to the heat index and I was the only one on the path. I was reminded of Rudyard Kipling’s quote about India: Only mad dogs and Englishman go out in the noonday sun. But there I was, pushing myself to my very limit. Normally my average heartrate on a ride is around 115-120. This ride it was 137. I did three laps and ran out of time, so I headed home.

My house in Rochester sits near the top of a rather large hill, so every ride ends with a climb. By the time I got halfway up the hill, my entire world was my legs, my lungs, the bike and the road. Then something like a switch went off in my brain...and I was better! I finished my ride, took a cool shower and greeted my kids with a smile when they arrived.

I don’t know if you’ve ever ridden a big hill on a bike, but it’s painful, especially when it’s really hot and humid, and the harder you peddle, the more painful it is. I did this to myself on purpose so that what happened with my brain would happen. But I knew two things before I started. First, that this pain would not harm me. I was not destroying my body by riding hard, it was simply painful. Second, I knew that the pain would completely disappear within minutes of cresting the hill. Knowing these two things I could take this terribly hard ride which allowed me to take out my foul mood on my bike rather than on my children. It was the suffering that I chose, it was the suffering that I *wanted*...because I knew that it would be good for me and for others.

So, when Paul writes, *“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us,* I am aware that the suffering I put myself through when riding my bike is most definitely NOT what Paul is talking about, but it is similar in the two ways that I just spoke of. 1) It will not damage you irreparably, and 2) It is temporary; this too shall pass.

Between now and the time that God will reveal this glory to us, this is when we will be called on to suffer with Christ for the sake of the world. And that’s when we realize that this promise of future glory is not merely pie in the sky by and by. No. The great weight of this promise pushes back into our present reality. God will not abandon or forsake us;

instead, God promises to be a very present help in time of trouble...and promises to be with us in our weakness. The Spirit will intercede for us when we do not even know what to ask for or say in our prayers.

And we know that God can work through our brokenness, our weakness, our suffering, even our sin, to work good in this world. What freedom!! All things work together for good for those who love God! This is such good news for me because I know how I can be. If there's a way to mess up a project, I'll find it, that's for sure! To know that God can work with even *that??* Well, that right there is powerfully freeing and a tremendous relief.

It the midst of all of this, it is so easy to feel like we are alone, that God has, in fact, abandoned us to our weakness and suffering. And that is when Paul really hits the gas.

I haven't memorized many extended passages from the Bible, but I've got the last verses of this chapter tattooed on my heart. I don't know if I am capable of preaching at a funeral without referencing these beautiful lines. (btw, you'll if you pay attention, you'll hear some of these words later in the service. There *will* be a test...) Nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. And in a ridiculously long laundry list of things that can make it feel like God is NOT with us – hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness(!), peril, sword, death, life, angels, rulers, things present, things to come, power, height, depth...nor anything else in all creation (he throws in at the very end just in case he forgot something!) – none of this could ever possibly separate us from God's love in Christ. It's like I always tell my confirmation students: Your true identity, above any other identification, is beloved child of God. It is sheer gift, not your own doing. You can't mess it up, lose it or break it; and nobody can take it away from you.

There is work to do, my sisters and brothers, and we are the body of Christ so it's up to us to get at it and keep at it. And I've said it before but I'll say it again: You've got this!! Not because you're such hot stuff (although you are!), but because God is with you and will work good through what you do out of love of God.

Amen.