

The Surety of Grace
A Sermon on Romans 8:26-39
Proper 12
July 30, 2017

Introduction

We often hear 1 Corinthians 13 read at weddings and Romans 8:36-39 at funerals. They are beautiful, poetic texts that give people comfort. The bride and groom want to hear that love is patient, love is kind. A grieving family wants to hear that nothing can separate the dearly departed from the love of God.

Pastors usually don't mention at weddings that 1 Corinthians 13 is about love between members of a church. It would be more appropriate to read at board meetings than weddings. Pastors also don't mention at funerals that Romans 8 is directed toward the suffering that the living are facing.

In the midst of Ordinary Time we have the luxury of looking at Paul meant when he wrote these texts. That allows us to go beyond the poetry and see how the text fits in Paul's theology and adds to our own understanding of how God is at work in our lives.

First Move: Acknowledging Our Dependence on God

Today's text is the high point of Romans. It completes an argument that Paul has been building through the first eight chapters.

He has described how all people are under the power of sin. The kind of sin that Paul is talking about is sins of the flesh—people focus on their own fleeting desires and act out of self interest instead of seeking communion with God. Gentiles have worshiped false gods, so God has allowed them to be consumed by their sins.

Faith brings people back into right relationship with God. Paul's word is righteous—faith makes people righteous. Jesus is our model for faith or trust in God. Jesus turns to God for direction instead of trying to please himself. Jesus was obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Followers of Christ escape the power of sin through their baptisms. They share in the crucifixion of Christ, dying to sin and rising to new life. Christ frees us to live under the power of the spirit.

Christ is the first fruits of the resurrection of the dead. Paul explains this further in 1 Corinthians 15. Christ has been transformed into a spiritual body, which has replaced his fleshly body. Followers of Christ are eagerly awaiting their own

resurrection, when their bodies will be transformed into spiritual bodies. The resurrection of the dead will take place at the end of the age, when creation also will be transformed.

Until then, Christians are living in the in between times. Creation suffers and groans with Christians as they await the end of the age. They are living with the tension between the already and not yet. The ages overlap. Christians can see glimpses of the kingdom. They can see the way things ought to be, but they cannot realize it in their present embodiment. The time in between is a time of groaning in frustration, longing for what is yet to be.

That brings us to today's text. Christians are confused and frustrated in belonging to both epochs. We are left speechless by the contrast between visions of heaven and the frustrations of the present. It is hard for us to discern God's will.

The spirit helps shoulder our weakness. It shows us what we should pray for. What is fundamental in prayer is the expression of dependence on God.

The spirit restores complete communication between God and creation. God sent the spirit to each believer to open the lines of communication. The spirit gives confidence in the future and sustains weakness in the present.

God searches our hearts. The spirit is hidden in our hearts and known only to God. The spirit cries out to God on our behalf with groans that cannot be expressed in words. The spirit still looks to God even when it has nothing to say. God recognizes in the groans a basic orientation to and dependence on God.

This attitude in prayer establishes a new direction for our lives. Failing to acknowledge human weakness is the mind set that gives sin its hold over a person.

Paul introduces a final theological concept in today's text: love. "To the ones who love God, all things work together for good." The idea of loving God is not typical of Greco-Roman religion. Greeks and Romans served and worshiped the gods but they did not love them. The ones who love God is a very Jewish expression. The faithful are often described in the Old Testament as those who love God. Those who love God are those who have acknowledged their creatureliness. It is a sense of complete helplessness in the face of hostile forces, such as sin and death and flesh.

Those who love God "are called according to his purpose." Believers are assured that their part as the people of God is not accidental or random. The outworking of the divine purpose was clearly envisaged from the beginning.

The ones who love God are conformed to the image of the risen Christ, not to the earthly Jesus. The end of God's creative purpose is resurrection not incarnation. Christ is the firstborn of a new race of eschatological people who fulfill the design that God had from the beginning of creation. God's purpose to bring creation and

creatures to their potential is certain and undefeatable. Man was made in the image of God but was deformed by sin. Resurrection transforms the believer back into the image of God. God glorifies the believers by sharing his own glory with men and women he has made and who in the new age are fully transformed into the image of God.

Redemption is the destiny that God has set for creation. Our destiny is in the hands of an all-powerful and loving God,

Second Move: Celebrating God's Purpose for Creation

That ends the sustained argument of the first eight chapters of Romans. What remains in the last eight verses is a celebration of God's redemption of humanity.

Paul asks, "If God is for us, who is against us?" Us now extends beyond Israel and includes Gentiles. Their faith makes them brothers and sisters of the risen Christ.

Paul answers his own question. "God did not spare even his own son but handed him over for the sake of us all." This is an allusion to Abraham's intent to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22. God did not require Abraham to carry out the sacrifice, but God demonstrated his own faithfulness to us by sacrificing his own son to free us from the power of sin.

This gives Paul great confidence. If God already has given so much, he will graciously give of all things. All things refers to all creation. The new humanity will share Christ's lordship over all creation.

Paul envisions a courtroom scene at the final judgment. "Who will bring charges against the chosen ones of God?" The chosen ones of God is a central element in Jewish self-understanding. Paul wants to show the continuity between Israel and the eschatological people of God. Paul answers his question, "God is the one who justifies."

"Who is the one who is condemning?" Christ Jesus will intercede on our behalf.

Paul's final question: "What will separate us from the love of God?" He lists hardships that he has faced and that are facing Christians in the in-between times. Oppression, distress, persecution, hunger, nakedness, danger and sword. These sufferings are evidence of our union with the crucified one.

Paul lifts his eyes beyond the individual believer and even beyond the cosmic character of the present age. Paul looks at God's purpose from the beginning of time to fulfill the potential of all creatures and all creation.

God's love is stronger than any other force in the universe. Paul lists the entire array of spiritual force that seem to be threats to God. Here is how I translate that list:

For I have been convinced that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things happening nor things about to happen nor powers nor the world above nor the depths [below] nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our lord.

Whatever forces threaten God's work are impotent before God. No power on earth can prevent the completion of God's purpose for creatures and creation from the beginning of time

Paul is comforting believers in Rome who are suffering in the in-between times. They are suffering because they can see glimpses of the kingdom. They can see the gap between what is and what ought to be. Paul assures them that God is with them in their suffering.

Third Move: Comforted by the Surety of Grace

Today's text would be most in keeping with Paul's original intent if it was used to comfort people in the suffering they are presently experiencing for being believers instead of to comfort grieving families at funerals that the recently deceased has gone to live with Jesus. Knowing that nothing will separate you from the love of Christ gives you the strength to endure and gives you confidence that God's purposes will prevail to bring an end to the present evil age and redeem believers and redeem creation.

I addressed this kind of suffering a few weeks ago when we were studying 1 Peter. I said that few congregations in America have experienced the kind of suffering that Peter's churches endures. Now we could add Paul's churches to the list. We are not insulted for being Christians. Being Christian is socially acceptable.

How do white, middle-class Christians suffer in America? Not suffer in general but suffer as Christians? I suggested that God suffers when the least of these suffer. If we are to play a part in God's story, we will care about the ones who are suffering today. The most vulnerable people today are the immigrant, the refugee, the prisoner, the hungry, the homeless. We will stand in solidarity with them. As we empathize with them, we will share in their suffering.

Today I would like to consider other ways that white, middle-class Christians suffer in America.

I think we experience the same frustration between the way things are and the way things ought to be.

We try to be good stewards of creation. We are a Green Chalice congregation. We try to reduce our carbon footprint. We are concerned about climate change, the

destruction of barrier reefs, the acidification of the oceans, the rising of sea level, the disappearance of species, the increase in floods and hurricanes, droughts and heat waves. We share in the suffering of creation. We worry about what the planet will be like for our grandchildren.

Partisan politics causes a lot of us to suffer. We are disturbed by the lack of civility in political debates. Some would even say the violence in political debates. There is no attempt at bipartisanship or consensus. It is win at all costs. Politicians and voters seem more concerned with what is good for their party than what is good for the country. The Resist movement seems to be adopting the belligerence of the Tea Party Movement. We fear that nationalism is on the rise and that democracy is giving way to autocracy. We worry about what the country will be like for our grandchildren.

We are concerned about the future of the church. Last week we talked about *The End of White Christian America*, a new book by Robert P. Jones. Mainline churches have lost more than half of their members in the least 40 years. Evangelical churches started losing members 10 to 20 years ago. Robert P. Jones points out that the losses are most significant among millennials. Nearly half of millennials no longer consider themselves affiliated with a church or with a religion. Most of them grew up in evangelical churches. They are turned off by the partisan politics in church. They don't see the spirit of Christ in church. We see the attendance declining in our church and churches like ours. We are worried that church won't be around for our grandchildren.

Do we still have confidence that God is in control? That God's purpose will be carried out in the end?

We are worried and fearful. Fear is the opposite of trust. Paul would say that fear is a desire of the flesh. We should be concerned about these things, but we should be confident in the surety of grace. If we turn to God, God will comfort us in our present affliction. God is not giving up on us. God will see us through. God will still be there for our grandchildren.

It is not up to us to save the world. We have a lord and savior for that. Jesus has saved us and filled our lives with meaning. Our call is to follow him and bring the spirit of Christ to our own little corner of the world.

I sometimes get frustrated at living in Oklahoma. I see my call as trying to humanize the criminal justice system. I have gone out to the State Legislature to support legislation to end debtor's prison in Oklahoma, which is the incarceration of defendants for failing to pay costs and fees. I have been active in the Oklahoma Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty for several years. Oklahomans last year voted

in a state question by a margin of 66 to 34 to put the death penalty in the state constitution. Sometimes it feels like beating your head against the wall. It is hard to see any results.

Don't worry about results. The results are in God's hands. Our call is to follow Christ. God resurrected Jesus without any help from Jesus. Christ is the first fruits of the resurrection. God will resurrect us, too. God will redeem all creation. That is the purpose that God has been pointing to from the beginning of creation.

Conclusion

It is not up to us to question the timetable. It may take another 1,000 years. It may take 10,000 years. We can't be eaten up with worry and fear. Our attitude, and the attitudes of our grandchildren and our descendants in thousands of years, should be confidence that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our lord.

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