

Sermon for Trinity Church

Proper 12, 2017

"...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."

My maternal grandparents were named Nick and Beulah Justice. I named my son after my grandfather; my daughter, Meghan, is eternally glad that I didn't name her after my grandmother. My grandparents were two of the best people I've ever known, and my grandmother among the finest Christians. Life was challenging for them; as a family, they suffered grinding poverty. My grandfather was a coal miner and a union man, the two meaning he was underpaid while living under threat. My grandmother was devoted to her Appalachian church whose motto was, "Be ye perfect as the father is perfect." She sang with a gusto that reminded me that someone once said that my grandmother knew all the words to the songs--and none of the notes! I can remember attending church with Grandmother Beulah as a child. As was customary in those communities, the local undertaker passed out fans to be used on Sunday morning. One side of the fan displayed the name of the undertaker and on the other was the question, "You think it's hot here?" I'm telling you this out of admiration for my grandparents but also to tell you something terrible—my grandmother lived in constant fear of God's judgement.

Living with that kind of fear gnaws at your soul. Beulah was always worried about the souls of her family, including her grandchildren. How, emphatically, how, could anyone ever expect to attain the perfection of Jesus? Were we all condemned? Have we hardly any hope? As you can tell, my grandmother found God both loving and terrible in the same moment. How can we be saved from that fear?

It's nearly impossible to know for sure what the preoccupations of the early Roman church might have been. The problem is that we only have one half of the correspondence between the Roman church and Paul. Only Paul's letter remains. But like reading one half of a love correspondence, sometimes we can see into the heart of the other half. Sometimes, one half of the correspondence can tell us a great deal about what the other party is thinking.

Paul has been writing about the danger under which the Roman church has been living. As one translator has written, Paul wanted to show the Roman church the way "out of the brutal tyranny of sin and death." The Roman church apparently has been trying to live according to the requirements of the Law. And apparently, they are not doing well. As Paul wrote a little earlier, "How is it that when I

commit to doing good, somehow my best intentions fail?" I don't believe that's a psychological self-assessment. Instead, I believe Paul is stating fact—we just can't seem to help ourselves no matter how hard we try. What are we to do?

Paul offers an answer today, a profoundly kind and pastoral answer, an answer meant to wipe away fear and establish peace. First, Paul writes, we need to understand the true nature of our relationship with God. That relationship, he writes, doesn't depend on our initiative. Not one bit. Instead, and even modern Christians find this surprising, God initiates our bond. God reaches out to us in prayer, not because we began the prayer but because God first prayed in us. We don't first pray. Instead, God prays in us through the power of the Spirit. That notion that someone "found Jesus" couldn't be more wrong for Paul—Jesus has long ago found us. Search our hearts with sighs too deep for words and know that God intercedes for us. God loves us even before we knew to love God.

But that's not all that happens, by no means. Paul writes that God creates all things to work together for our benefit. All of our benefit. Not just some of us, not just individuals, but all of us. The term that Paul uses for "work together" is the root of "synergy." Right about this point in the letter to the Romans, the expression "predestination" rears up. You can work out the human problem. If God knows everything, and therefore God knows who will be saved from judgment and who will not, then God must predestine some to be saved and some not. It sounds like an implacable law of human justice. But God's justice is not human justice. God's not burdened with sentencing guidelines. Instead, those who are chosen are called, justified and finally glorified. And who will that be? Well, quite frankly, everyone who accepts God's love, a love that God is teaching us through our hearts by prayer and the Spirit.

Wait a minute, you may be saying, "Can anyone have this love?" Paul's answer comes with a confident and penetrating "yes." Paul asks the rhetorical questions: If God is for us, who can be against us? Who, who can bring any charge against God's people? Who among humanity has the right to condemn what God loves?

Paul doesn't try to answer those dramatic questions for I think you already know where he is going. He writes yet another loving question: "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" In other words, is there anything any force can do to come between God and us. Instead, Paul continues with these ringing words: "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." That's right, nothing, absolutely nothing, including our own fears, can come between us and the God who loves us.

You may wonder if I'm arguing for universalism, universal salvation. That's entirely up to the God who loves us. As we heard in the Gospel last week of the wheat and the rye grass, humans have poor judgment when it comes to deciding who is saved and who is not. I am arguing that people like Beulah and Nick, like you and like me, do not have to live in fear of God. We don't even have to live in fear of our own complicated selves. Instead, we need to hear those words afresh, that God in the Spirit seeks us with a compassionate "sigh too deep for words." And God, who always finds us, will tear down any impediment we may have constructed between God and the God who loves us. Nothing, absolutely nothing, can "separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Amen.

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