

Lexington Presbyterian Church

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Sermon

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Scripture: Romans 8: 26 -39 (NRSV)

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes^[a] with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And God,^[i] who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit^[s] intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.^[i]²⁸ We know that all things work together for good^[u] for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ²

⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.^[u] ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

³¹ What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² 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? ³³ Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who 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.^[u] ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

*"For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."*

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

Romans chapter 8 verses 26-39 is one of my most favorite section in the Bible. I pray that God, through the Spirit, will help get that across today.

"Anchored"

My theology, my God-talk, is built upon four words: joy, peace, hope, and love. These are our advent words. They mark a coming, the coming of a beginning, the beginning of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. They are mere words, yet they have such deep, life-giving meaning. These four words set the stage for what we have the potential to experience in our lives with God, the author of all our beginnings. For me, beginnings are the most pregnant of occasions. Even though my life hasn't been all daffodils and roses, it has been rich with opportunities for new beginnings in Christ.

Through the life-giving power of Jesus Christ, I have experienced real joy, a peace that surpasses all understanding, a love that will not let me go. And I do my best to live into a hope beyond that which can only be imagined. These four advent words shape my life; they baffle me; comfort me, tend to me, and guide me on my journey of becoming more like Christ. I see my life taking shape, grounded in Christ's behaviors, his focuses, and his charge. I see also where I have room to grow, my weaknesses, my shortcomings, my "yuckies" where Paul would rather say..."where my flesh is winning over my spiritual call in Christ." In the previous chapter (Chapter 7), Paul describes this dilemma, and last Sunday, Rev. Gench reminded us of this in his sermon, *Becoming Christian*.

Today, we find ourselves at the end of Chapter 8. In his commentary on Romans, David Bartlett, Professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, states "that Romans Chapter 8 is the climax of the book." The purpose of the letter, he goes on to say, "has thus far been to insist that there is one God for all people and all of creation and that God seeks to bring the whole creation into right relation with God's self through Jesus Christ." I posit that Paul's letter to the Romans up until this point is a "case for Christ" as the ultimate act of God's love for his creation. Paul is inviting the Romans (us) to claim our new beginning for the ultimate ending. When we pray, Abba Father, thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven, we ascribe to Paul's finding that God's ways cannot be fully understood or known. However, we are to fully anchor ourselves in God's love for us shown in the birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is working for good in all things. Paul, my friends, is so keenly human and I find myself on the pages of this work in particular. He is relatable here. In his honesty, his humanity, his conversion, and his continuous search for new beginnings. Not just for himself, but more importantly, for you and me. For the world.

These days there's much to take on in this world. I'm exhausted, just saying it. But Paul would tell me, tell us, to endure and persevere. Paul, for me, is a bona fide life coach. I'm a coach and encourager at heart. I would describe myself as a life coach because I teach gymnastics, but gymnastics is merely the sport I use to guide my athletes as they navigate life. A few years ago, I found myself at a loss for words amid a child of God's distress. Her name is Hadley. Hadley is a meek, quiet child. She is talented, easy-going, and a beautiful gymnast. Her inner light was bright. It was a privilege to coach her, and I'm forever changed to have known her.

We were at a gymnastics meet, and Hadley was having a challenging day. This was very unusual for Hadley, and it took me by surprise. I pulled out my best coaching tools, and nothing helped. She soon was sobbing on her knees and would not move. In an instant, I knew Hadley had lost her way. Her performance, her anxiety, her lack of strength, and her perceived defeat, all got the better of her. We were about 40 feet apart when I began to pray to God for her. This week, on Thursday during the Koinonia Sunday School class, I was awakened to something through our lesson. At that moment, as the theologian David Paulson described, I became Hadley's "personal groaner." I prayed on behalf of her, and we ultimately received an answer to prayer. I am keenly aware that the Holy Spirit given in Christ is looming about ready, already groaning for us feeble people, however on that day, I was desperate for Hadley. I knew in my heart that there was nothing I could do or say in my earthly coaching realm to make one iota of difference. What does a desperate soul do when the going gets tough, and desperation leaks into a situation? You, as Paul reminds us to do, groan and pray right along with the Spirit. My

typical pep talk, "You've got this," turned into a prayer based on the assurance given to me by Paul in Romans chapter 8, verses 26-39. I didn't fully know what was happening back then, but again this past Thursday on a Zoom Sunday school meeting, Hadley and my experience with her immediately came to mind.

On that day, after praying/groaning to God 40 feet away, I walked over to Hadley and met her on her knees. We prayed together. I asked the Lord to help Hadley remember who she was at her beginning and that nothing, not even failing, would separate her from her destiny in Christ Jesus. I asked for the Spirit to empower her to just stand up in the confidence that everything would be OK. I claimed for her on that day that what we were experiencing was just a moment on her journey of becoming, and it would serve her and all those watching her well, no matter the outcome of her gymnastics meet.

I am still awestruck by the event. That a tender child and I were literally drawn to our knees during warm-ups at a gymnastics meet to engage with the looming, ever-present Spirit "who was already groaning" on her behalf. It was a surreal and powerful moment where my role as a coach, my faith, and my call as a human being all seemed to be at one. But what is more, Hadley soon got up and understood she was just "stuck" in a swirling trap of expectation, and she was suffering, and she claimed it.

Life is hard. And "desperate times call for desperate measures."

You may think this example is trite compared to the world's problems and what is truly a desperate situation. I would agree, on the surface it is, but for Hadley that day, she was coming unglued and could not anchor herself to anything. She was a beautiful ship, swirling about in a raging ocean ready to consume her. She needed assurance. She needed reassurance. She needed to be reassured, she needed to remember, feel covered, cared for beyond the trite. She needed a holy pep talk. Romans 8 and in particular the text we read today is a big, fat giant holy pep talk. It calls us to live as if a new day, a moment can bring about a new beginning - a transformation in God's realm. A new pregnant manifestation of God's word in Jesus Christ among us. A new beginning based on what we face: the small things, the medium things, the big things. They all bring us closer to what swirls around us if we dare to engage.

The book of Romans is said to be the last book written by Paul. It is "gospel" for the human condition as it seeks to merge with the divine. A provocative and vulnerable expose of Paul as he dares to engage life. He dares to be transformed, and he dares to tell you that he struggles with sin. He dares to fail. He dares to thrive. He dares to keep finding new beginnings to "keep on, keeping on," no matter what. He dares to spread what he has experienced, what he knows to be true, what he feels about life, and what it's meant to be. And then, convicted, he tells the small populations of Roman Christians whom he hopes to meet but never does, that they are pregnant with possibilities "in all things" - a new beginning for God's ultimate realm.

I've experienced little and much. I've experienced pain and healing. I've experienced suffering and joy. I've experienced a blessed and complicated life. I have been to third world countries and seen poverty and nakedness beyond my comprehension. I have been bedside with a loved one, who lived "FULL of life," and knowing her belovedness in Christ, and watched her be slowly snuffed out by a vicious disease.

I have seen the most beautiful, well-intended, deeply convicted people struggle with addiction and fail to overcome it time and time again. I have seen supposedly good coaches abuse children. I have seen a beautiful God-fearing person before me complete in faith and beaming with the love of Christ, within hours take his own life.

Life is hard.

What have you seen? And I ask, why are you still here? Well, the words of Romans Chapter 8:26-39 are why we are still here. We are all at one with Paul. Or at the very least we want to be. Paul, was convinced in the midst of his suffering and ongoing dilemma of who he was as a "chosen" person of God, that his compliancy, his book of "law," his vicious behavior to snuff out the lives of those who didn't fall in line with his religion, that he was "new beginning – an "advent." His life all that was messy and good, is a stellar example of an "anchored" faith in God, God's Son, our Lord, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

It occurred to me last evening that the things that Paul lists in this scripture section that have the potential to cause separation; hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, and peril he experienced fully on his journey of faith. How Paul dies and why is not clear, however, most historians posit that the Apostle Paul died a martyr by the guillotine for the faith during the reign of the heinous emperor Nero. Paul's life was hard. Beloved, the power of separation is real, and Paul makes no bones about it. There are forces that cause separation. If we are not anchored to our faith, they can wash over us like a giant wave and swallow us whole.

Yes, beloved, life is hard.

Yet and still and forevermore, Paul's assurance is clear: nothing, nothing, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Nothing. So while you take on life and all that comes your way, all that seeks to separate us: the pandemic, racism, the death of a loved one, not being in the sanctuary right now, the loss of a job, the abuse of a child, a day that finds you swirling around in the sea like a boat without an anchor, remember this text is your lifeline. So, mark this page in your Bible and circle these verses. Please read them to be reminded that God is love. God's love perfectly expressed in our Lord Jesus Christ. Be reminded that you have an advocate, a personal groaner in the Holy Spirit. Be reminded when you can't groan for yourself; others will be personal groaners for you. Be reminded that you are God's expression of JOY. You are capable, by the power of the Holy Spirit given to us in Christ Jesus, to be ambassadors of peace, hope, and above all else, love. You are an advent.

All glory be to God.

Let us pray: Lord, I ask by your Holy Spirit that you would open our minds to the truth and give us fruitful discernment, so that we are not tossed about by every wind of doctrine, every wave of suffering, but anchored in your faith and love. Amen.