

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Romans 8:12-15  
July 23, 2017

## Leading up to Love

An elaborate chandelier hung in the dining room of the house where I did a good deal of my growing up. Looking as though it belonged in Downton Abbey, it was not something my parents would have acquired on purpose; it came with the house. Every now and then, my mother would detach each dangling string of faceted glass, lay it on a towel on the dining room table, give each piece a good polish, and put all the pieces back in their places.

How it sparkled when you flipped the switch.

Occasionally a passage of scripture calls for the same treatment. Take it apart. Have a good look. Squint at it from several directions, and then pray that you can put it back together before Sunday morning arrives.

At other times, nothing could be more inappropriate than to dismantle that same passage. Sometimes we just need to hear the words – all of them – linked together by the Holy Spirit. Sometimes we just need to let the light shine in the darkness.

The concluding verses of the eighth chapter of Paul's Letter to the church in Rome are like that. Most of us associate these words with funerals and memorial services – and for good reason. With death a palpable reality – with the urn of ashes sitting on a stand by the Easter candle or the coffin covered by funeral pall -- we need to hear these words of confident assurance: Nothing – nothing in all creation – not even death itself – will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

That's the glorious culmination of a line of thought that Paul initiates back in chapter 5 of his letter. His argument builds and builds until it reaches its climax in verse 39 of chapter 8. If you take away only one idea from this morning's sermon, take this home with you: *Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.*

That's the message I hope grieving families take to the graveyard or columbarium with them when they leave this sanctuary. That's the good news that shouts the to the grave, "You have not won! You have lost your sting. We have nothing to fear from you."

Basking, as it were, in the light of that good news, we are emboldened to look a bit more closely at how Paul arrived at this glorious denouement.

The problem Paul is addressing in these verses is *suffering*. The way Paul sees it, suffering is the result of sin. Sin's string leads all the way back to Adam and Eve in the Garden, when those two representatives of all humanity chose to go their own way, regardless of God's clear intentions.

The sin of Adam and Eve triggered an avalanche of unanticipated consequences. It led not only to our alienation from God, but also to the disruption of the entire created order. Because of sin, not only did Adam have to eke out a living by the sweat of his brow and Eve experience increased pain in child bearing – the whole creation was thrown out of sync.

Biblically speaking, the environmental crisis you and I face today, didn't begin with factories spewing poison during the industrial revolution. It began back in the Garden of Eden, when our spiritual ancestors lost touch with who they are as creatures within an ordered creation. Adam's original sin was his refusal to be human.

And what a fine mess that refusal has gotten us into.

Adam and Eve became estranged from one another as well as from God. Shame, guilt, pride, and greed came to dominate their life. Eventually, God gave us the law, but, according to Paul, the law didn't fix the fundamental problem. The law is useful for curbing our worst behavior, but it also serves as a constant reminder of our enslavement to sin.

Christ came in human flesh to free us from sin's bondage. By his death and resurrection, Christ destroyed sin's grip on us – something the law could not accomplish. With the Spirit of Christ within us, we are free from sin's domination – free to live as God intended from the start.

For Paul, Jesus Christ is the new Adam, the human one who changes the narrative. Through Christ, we have been granted a fresh start and have been adopted into God's family. We have become, Paul says, **“children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.”**<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 8:17

Through Christ, we have glimpsed, you and I, the glorious future God has in mind for us and for the whole creation. Paul speaks of “the redemption of our bodies,” but that’s only part of the picture.

One day, the wolf shall lie down with the lamb, swords will be beaten into plowshares, racial divisions will dissolve, and there will be no need for border walls. One day, there will be no babies born to live but a few weeks, and no need for a Department of Homeland Security. One day, **“the earth will be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.”**<sup>2</sup>

But until that day arrives, the whole creation groans, and you and I groan along with it. The suffering that you and I experience is part and parcel of the groaning of creation. It’s the same suffering that Christ elected to endure out of love for us, and real as it is, Paul wants us to keep that suffering in perspective. For Christians, suffering is part of our being joined with Christ. Christ shared our humanity, and he still shares it.

Therefore, we do not suffer alone. Christ suffers with us, through the same Spirit who knows our prayers before we can utter them. Our prayers are clumsy, inarticulate mutterings, Paul admits, but when we pray, the Spirit intercedes for us **“with groans too deep for utterance,”**<sup>3</sup> **“with sighs too deep for words.”**<sup>4</sup>

Paul does not suggest, as some have interpreted, that suffering is good, or that that God rewards us for suffering bravely. He says instead, that God’s works for good, even through suffering.

**“All things work together for good for those who love God . . .”** That’s how the New Revised Standard Version renders Paul’s very difficult Greek. I think an even better translation might be, **“God makes all things work for good with those who love him.”**<sup>5</sup>

No one, not even the Apostle Paul, can say why any one of us suffers. Why does one person struggle with addiction and another fall into depression? Why do some marriages prosper and other end up in divorce court? Why does anyone suffer?

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<sup>2</sup> Habakkuk 2:14

<sup>3</sup> Romans 8:26 Translation by Brendan Byrne, *Romans* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1966) 266-7

<sup>4</sup> Romans 8:26 New Revised Standard Version

<sup>5</sup> Byrne, op. cit.

Paul cannot say. None of us can. What we can say, with Paul, is that **“The sufferings of this present age are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.”**<sup>6</sup>

I get the feeling, reading between the lines, that those new Christians in Rome must have been feeling abandoned by God. Suffering can do that to you. It can make you forget who you are – and even who it is who loves you. Paul is the master of complicated theological argument, but, at heart, he’s still a pastor. He doesn’t downplay the suffering of his flock, but he does assure them that they have not been abandoned.

When I sit by a bedside or stand by a graveside, I don’t launch into long, convoluted arguments about sin and suffering. That kind of thing is fine when you have time to take down the pieces of the chandelier and give every part a good polish. I just read aloud from Romans, chapter 8.

Pastor Paul understands this. That’s why he ends his discourse not with a footnote, but with a doxology.

Sin isn’t really the point. Neither is suffering. The point is love, God’s love that conquers all things and knows no limits. **Not 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 – *nothing* can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.**<sup>7</sup>

In that love we stand, and toward the future defined by that love we live, now and always.

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<sup>6</sup> Romans 8:18

<sup>7</sup> Romans 8:38-39