

“MORE THAN CONQUERORS”

Romans 8:26-39

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When I went to seminary many eons ago, I began to hear my professors refer to certain sections of the Bible as “purple passages.” This was confusing to me, because in my Bible the words of Jesus always appeared in red! I had no idea what “purple passages” were, but I quickly came to understand the term. The color purple symbolizes royalty and splendor; there are passages in the Bible that are especially regal and splendid; so they are called “purple passages.”

I think you’ll agree that the eighth chapter of Romans is one of them. Much of Paul’s epistle to the Romans reads like a theology textbook; it is dense and difficult reading. However, chapter 8 reads more like an actual letter – a letter written by a loving pastor to a hurting congregation. It is soaring and eloquent, but in a down-to-earth way, filled with words of empathy and reassurance for its readers.

For me at least, the one phrase in this passage that stands out in the deepest purple is found in verse 37. Paul has just recited a long list of travails he and his readers are experiencing: “hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword” (Romans 8:35). Then he has the audacity to say that “in all these things we are more than conquerors” (v. 37). Doesn’t it strike you as strange for Paul to refer to himself and his fellow Christians in the same breath as the word “conquerors”?

In the year 1066, William of Normandy took an army across the English Channel, defeated other claimants to the English throne, and was crowned king of England on Christmas Day. His achievement was called the Norman Conquest, and William of Normandy became forever known as William the Conqueror. When you and I think of conquerors, we typically think of people like that – strong-armed rulers and military leaders who vanquish a perceived enemy and take over their territory. Needless to say, this hardly fits the description of Paul and the early Christians. As a powerless, persecuted minority in the Roman Empire, they are not the conquerors, they are the conquered. It is the Roman emperor and the Roman legions who deserve to be called conquerors, not the Roman church. And yet, here Paul is declaring that these feeble, fledgling Christians are conquerors; in fact, they are “more than conquerors”; they have taken the act of conquest to a whole new level.

This passage reminds us that conquerors come in many forms. Conquerors don’t have to be politicians or warriors who use force to lord it over their enemies. Conquerors are often ordinary people who overcome extraordinary adversity, and do so through peaceful means. Today we speak of individuals who conquer a background of poverty or abuse; we speak of persons who conquer cancer, depression, or addiction. As a society, we are striving to conquer a physical malady, COVID-19, as well as a social malady, systemic racism. If we are on our best behavior, we can conquer all of these adversaries without firing a shot.

This is the kind of challenge the church at Rome is facing. They are trying to overcome the assaults of a human adversary they can see – the emperor and his henchmen – and a spiritual adversary they cannot see – the forces of evil in heavenly places. At the same time, Paul reminds

them that the enemy is not just out there or up there; it is also in here. Read between the lines, and it's clear that at times the Christians at Rome are their own worst enemy. They are in danger of succumbing to an inner spiritual malaise which desperately needs treatment.

I spoke on the phone recently with the current pastor of a church I had previously served in another state. I asked her, "How are those good folks coping with the pandemic?" She replied, "They've handled the threat of the disease very well. They've taken all the precautions, and no one in the congregation has come down with the virus. Their biggest challenge," she said, "is not the pandemic itself, but the feelings it has produced in their hearts – the sense of vulnerability, the fear, the anxiety, the loneliness, the restlessness, the impatience, the boredom, the despair."

This is precisely the issue Paul is addressing here in Romans. The challenge you and I face as Christians is not just external – from an enemy outside ourselves. The challenge is also internal – how to ward off doubt and discouragement and maintain faith and hope in the midst of trying times.

In three purple phrases, Paul assures us that God can be trusted to help us meet both the outer challenge and the inner challenge. Paul starts off by telling us that "the Spirit helps us in our weakness" (v. 26). We look about us and see forces at work that are truly cosmic. They are larger than life, often hidden from our view, difficult even to identify. We are victims, and our utter weakness is exposed.

We are so overwhelmed that words escape us. Our loss of words leaves us feeling helpless. In spite of having Jesus' model prayer and an abundance of prayers throughout the Bible that reflect the whole range of human experience, we find ourselves speechless. Some of us find ourselves now knowing what we ought to pray. Is it permissible to pray for our will to be done, or should we pray only for God's will to be done? Do we pray to be relieved from suffering, or do we pray for grace to accept and endure suffering? Then for some of us, the issue is not knowing "how to pray as we ought" (v. 26). Do we use a lot of pretty religious words, or do we speak to God naturally, as we would to a close friend? Should we be proper and diplomatic, or should we totally honest? Confusion abounds when we try to pray, especially when we are up against it: what to say? how to say it?

Paul reminds us that we have an ally in those moments when we are speechless before God. The Holy Spirit comes to our rescue. The "Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words," Paul says (v. 26b). What a remarkable, reassuring picture this is – the Spirit serving as an intermediary between ourselves and God, giving voice to our inarticulate thoughts. So often people in crisis tell me that they don't know what or how to pray, or feel that they can't pray. I ask if they've done any sighing. Of course they have, and we note how Paul dares to suggest that our "sighs too deep for words" are really the Spirit praying in us. That is so encouraging for me as a pastor, and as a guy who sighs a lot. "The Spirit helps us in our weakness" – specifically, in our struggle to pray.

Our weakness may also be manifest in the form of doubt and despair. The truth is, we are often not able to recognize the presence of God in the midst of our own adversity and pain. When we suffer, the lingering question is, "Where is God? How can this illness, this accident, this injustice, this death, possibly be beneficial?" We wonder about God's purpose and whether it will finally be realized. We ask whether the evil we experience merely masks the good that God intends

to achieve or whether the evil negates the good altogether. These questions are even more pressing when they are asked by those who are faithful to God. We sometimes wonder, “Is God being faithful to us, to me?”

And so, the second purple phrase Paul invokes to reassure his readers is this: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (v. 28). Other translations put it: “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.” I prefer the second translation because it places the emphasis on God’s activity.

Either way, people love to cite this verse, thinking it means that God is orchestrating everything in our lives so that all goes swimmingly well and leads to a happy ending. When someone who is suffering asks, “Why do bad things happen to good people?”, the answer they get is that bad things are really good things in disguise. Try telling that to the spouse of a COVID-19 victim, who watched her soulmate suffer at home, then couldn’t say goodbye to him when he died in the hospital, and is now “home alone” for the long haul. Try telling that to the family members of a Black person who died a violent, unjust death at the hands of a rogue police officer, or to a whole race of people who are objects of suspicion and discrimination merely because of the color of their skin. Try telling those individuals that God is just lining up the universe for our ultimate good, so they ought to look at the big picture and cheer up. Is this what Paul means when he claims that “all things work together for good?”

No, Paul is writing to people who are suffering profoundly and are trying to make sense of it. Paul is a realist; he fully acknowledges that bad things – awful things – do happen. At the same time, he asserts that God is always active, even in the most negative events. There is no circumstance so terrible that God is totally absent from it. Even when the purposes of God seem hidden and when the forces of evil are at work thwarting the divine will, God is still actively at work. God is capable of taking the worst of situations and bringing some good out of them.

I can’t think of one good thing about a virus that is ravaging millions around the globe. But God is resourceful enough to bring some good out of it – helping us to realize what really matters in our lives and who is most important to us; prompting us to be more connected, caring, and compassionate, even when we are socially distanced. Likewise, I can’t think of one good thing about the murder of George Floyd and others like him. But something good has come from those senseless tragedies – a time of national reckoning about racial injustice that is long overdue, a time of conversation and, yes, conflict which may actually lead to constructive action. Who is to say this isn’t the work of God, who “in all things works for the good of those who love him”? We take solace and comfort not in a belief that God has it all planned out or wills us to trials and tragedies, but in the promise that God is with us in all that.

This brings us to a third purple passage in Romans 8, which starts with a rhetorical question: “Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” (v. 35a). Here Paul is speaking to our separation anxiety, our fear that the trouble and trauma we endure will cut us off from the embrace of divine love. He offers a laundry list of bad experiences which have the potential to do just that. But then Paul answers his own question: “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (v. 37). Notice: we are “more than conquerors” not by our own prowess or power, but “through him who loved us.” It is God who guarantees the final victory over sin and evil, disease and death. In the meantime, no matter how ungodly our circumstances,

God never abandons us or ceases to love us. “For I am convinced,” Paul says, “that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, not 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” (vv. 38-39).

One of my most endearing former parishioners is a woman named Henrietta Phelps. She is in her late 80’s and lives in Liberty, New York. She wouldn’t mind if I identified her as a “character” – a one-of-a-kind, funny, unforgettable woman with a heart of gold, a servant spirit, and an abiding love for God. Henrietta gave me permission to share with you the story of her recent hospitalization. Early on in the pandemic, she came down with symptoms of pneumonia, which bear a resemblance to the symptoms of COVID-19. When she was admitted to the hospital, she tested negative for the virus, but she had to endure the same isolation and much of the same treatment as Coronavirus patients. She wondered if she would ever leave the hospital alive. She was totally alone except for the nurses coming in and out of her room. No granddaughter, no pastor, no church friends to visit her. No one was there in person to say, “I love you” – with one exception. Henrietta told me that as she lay in her hospital bed, cut off from everyone in her family and her large social network, she felt the unmistakable, powerful presence of God. The divine presence filled her hospital room and overflowed in her heart. She felt embraced by a divine love that would not let her go. If she had ever doubted it before, she had no doubts then that “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Friends, if you and I can’t trust God to stand by us and love us in the worst of times, then we might as well admit defeat, fold up our lawn chairs, and go home. If we can trust God in the worst of times, then “we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”