

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. Bart Roush

October 29, 2023

Romans 8:28–35, 37–39

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God's Spirit.

God of mercy, you promised never to break your covenant with us.

Amid all the changing words of our generation, speak your eternal Word that does not change. Then may we respond to your gracious promises with faithful and obedient lives, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose. For those whom God foreknew God also predestined to be conformed to the image of God's Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom God predestined God also called; and those whom God called God also justified; and those whom God justified God also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? God who did not withhold God's own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will God not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 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. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

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.

Today marks when we celebrate Reformation Sunday. This Sunday is when we remember the occasion on October 31, 1517, where Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther, a Catholic priest, was reading the book of Romans and in his readings, it raised concerns for him with some of the teaching of the church. Specifically, Luther was worried about what we call “works-righteousness.” This is the idea that our salvation depends upon our own acts. That we receive God’s grace only by doing certain things, and that we had to receive enough grace to find favor with God.

As Luther read through the book of Romans, he became troubled by this idea, and he thought the teaching of the church was going astray from what he read in scripture. Specifically, in the third chapter, Luther read, “But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

Later in chapter five, Luther read, “Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”

As Luther meditated and prayed on the word he heard in scripture, it led him to write his 95 theses or points about where he thought the Church was straying from scripture. What Luther read and came to understand was that our salvation was not obtained through our works, but through our faith in Jesus Christ. By Grace. Our justification was not through any merit of our own, not through works, but through our faith in God as the one in charge and responsible for the salvation of all humankind in the work of Christ as revealed in scripture.

Maybe to his surprise, these statements started some trouble. Luther did not intend to start something wholly different, but rather he was seeking a course correction. But these statements did start a major change, a reformation. Soon others followed in Luther's thinking. The French theologian John Calvin began to write in Geneva, Switzerland. A student of Calvin's, John Knox, then took this new thing to the Church of Scotland. And it grew from there. The Presbyterian Church finds its roots in the Protestant Reformation and through the Church of Scotland.

In their writings, these reformers identified what have become known as the "five solas;" five statements in Latin that articulate the core of this belief. Sola Gratia, sola fide, solus Christus, sola scriptura, and soli deo gloria. Sola is the word for only or alone. So, the five solas are salvation by grace alone, by faith alone, in Christ alone, according to scripture alone, for God's glory alone.

The primary point of these reformers was that the goodness is that we are made right with God, or justified, by the work of Christ, which imperfect humans receive through faith. And when we trust that our salvation is not dependent on ourselves, when we understand justification as a gift from God, that is truly Good News, and we may experience peace with God and growing confidence then in living for God.

Perhaps it is easy to miss just how mind-blowing this is. In the 8th chapter of Romans, the apostle Paul articulates the core of what this means, just how radical this is. God is for us, and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. Nothing. Not any external thing, not death or life (which about covers it) but he goes on just so we get the point... nothing now, or nothing in the future, no matter who is president or governor, not our boss or our teacher can take away God's love for us. Not our greatest moments, or our lowest moments – nothing in all creation – nothing, absolutely nothing will take God's love from us. It is a gift freely given no matter what. We are loved because of God's grace. Everything begins and ends with grace.

This is the good news of our faith; we do not have to earn this grace; it is freely given. When we understand this, we can then be set free in joy to be more fully who God made us to be, and to become more and more Christ like. And we can use some good news.

Paul asks, “What then are we to say about these things?” This sure seems like a pertinent question to me. How many times have I asked myself this question in the last several weeks and months? I've heard others ask the same. “What are we to say about these things?” In the face of all we see in the world, the war, the partisan divides, the unwillingness to work with others, yet more gun violence, the continued rise of Christian nationalism, the increase in laws seeking to limit people's freedoms to live freely, and other things we could name, it just seems too much. When we feel helpless and no longer have the words for lament, when we don't know where to start with our prayers, when we are unsure, when all we have left are our deep sighs, what are we to say about these things?” What are we to do? It is into this moment that Paul says, fear not, God is in charge. God is listening. God is at work.

Paul tells the Romans, and us, that despite the present circumstances, God is with us; God is for us. In his assurance, Paul tells us that despite the hardships of the world, we know “that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God’s purposes.” Some of us talked last week in the Thursday bible study, however, that Paul’s statement shouldn’t be understood as a theology that says, “all things happen for a reason,” or that all things that happen in life are good, or even, if we work hard enough and we are faithful enough then good things will naturally happen to us.

One equally good translation of that verse is “that in all things God works for the good.” “In all things God works for the good.” This subtle shift in language I think gets more at what it means that God is for us. To be human in the world is to know that there will be struggles, that there will be hardships. There is evil in the world, and it has consequences in the world, but I do not believe God is the creator of that evil or hardship to teach us a lesson. On the contrary, Paul is saying that God is active and at work in the world working toward the good.

God’s actions are described in this passage in several ways.¹ God foreknew, God predestined, God calls, God justifies, and God glorifies. God knows before all that is that God will save the world. God predestined that Jesus would be the model for humanity to follow. God calls the people to imitate Jesus. God justifies, or restores, God’s people to right relationship with God, the world, and one another. God declares this work good.

God is at work in the world and God is working toward the good. Even when the world seems overwhelming, in the face of all of these things, God is there, and God is for us. But not only that but Paul also tells us we are called according to God’s purpose, that is to work good in all things. God does not do this alone. We are called to join God in helping

make the world good. In a natural disaster, look for the helpers. In times of war, look to those working for peace. In times of distress, look for those that comfort. Look for those that provide the means of flourishing, look for those marching and organizing for a better way, look for those who in the face of insurmountable challenges still believe there is a better way. Our faith requires activity in the world. We do not have a passive God or a passive faith. We have a faith that is dedicated to active participation in the world to make it better.

And this is a communal effort, it is not just up to us as individuals. One of the things that is easy for us to forget is that scripture is most always written to a community and not to us as individuals. Paul writes to “we” and “us” and to “those who” love God in the plural. This passage isn’t just about individual salvation, Paul is addressing the faithful body of Christ. I find this to be a helpful reminder, particularly when I am in the midst of hardship or struggle. In those times when I don’t have the words or the energy, when things seem to be insurmountable, invariably someone comes along and lifts me up, gives me a word of comfort and encouragement, and good things seem possible again.

C. S. Lewis said, “Friendship... is born at the moment when one [person] says to another ‘What! You too? I thought that no one but myself...’”ⁱⁱ The comfort and care of the community cannot be overstated. As we celebrate the elders of Oak Grove Presbyterian church today at our Golden Harvest lunch, I am sure that many of you could speak to the importance of community. I am sure that many of you can recount times when God showed up in the form of another person to help you along the way. God does not leave us alone.

Paul gives us one final action for God, and it brings us back to the assurance with which Paul began. God intercedes for us in the person of Jesus Christ. Paul has strong conviction and confidence in God love for

us because God shows up in Jesus. And because of this, nothing, absolutely nothing can separate us from God's love. This is grace upon grace upon grace. This is good news; this is the hope we have in Jesus Christ.

“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose. For those whom God foreknew God also predestined to be conformed to the image of God's Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom God predestined God also called; and those whom God called God also justified; and those whom God justified God also glorified.

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Amen

ⁱ Anna M. V. Bowden describes this here <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-17/commentary-on-romans-826-39-6>

ⁱⁱ C.S. Lewis, “The Four Loves”