

Romans 8:26-39

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Irene Pak Lee

July 30, 2023

Illuminating God, thy word is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. And so as we again approach your Word this morning, illuminate our hearts, illuminate our minds, and illuminate our souls so that all that we say and do may be an authentic presentation of who we are reflecting who you are. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Together for Good

If you were here a couple weeks ago when I last preached, you might recognize part of our reading from Romans 8 today. I shared this great story about a Confirmation class that was told to memorize part of Romans 8 and the pastor asking each confirmand, "What shall separate you from the love of God?" And then hearing the beautiful response from each youth as we heard just now, "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." And that final student saying simply, Nothing. Nothing shall separate us from that love.

When I saw this week's lectionary texts and saw Romans 8, I was kicking myself for not saving that great story for today. 😊

This whole section from Romans 8 is just beautiful though, isn't it? The Spirit interceding on our behalf when we do not have the words to say or pray with sighs too deep for words...all things working together for good...if God is for us, then who is against us? And that final beautiful piece of how nothing, no nothing shall separate us from the love of God. These phrases and verses offer us encouragement and makes us feel warm and fuzzy and maybe even hopeful about this whole faith and Christian life thing.

There is a fast growing theologically conservative branch of Christianity called the Prosperity Gospel. The Prosperity Gospel tenants basically promise an assurance that God will give you everything you want, whether that be money in the bank, a successful career, a happy marriage, healing and health... all of this is at your fingertips if you believe and trust in God enough to provide it all for you and behave accordingly. In many threads of this, you are even granted more abundance if you give more money to the leader or pastor spouting

these promises-and so a lot of these ministers and leaders buy multimillion dollar homes, private jets, and fancy cars as evidence of God's love and provision if you just believe enough and give enough. Those who buy into this brand of Christianity, yes, are hoping for the fancy car or a windfall of money, but studies have found that the real desire and real appeal of this kind of belief system was for escape...escape from poverty, escape from the wounds of their past, escape from failing health. Scholar and theologian Kate Bowler in her studies about it writes, "The prosperity gospel looks at the world as it is and promises a solution. It guarantees that faith will always make a way. It offers an explanation for the problem of evil." This is from her book "Everything Happens for a Reason, and other Lies I Have Loved."

The thought of a God granting us a Bentley and good health if we just pray hard enough, give enough money to the church, and follow a set of specific instructions might sound silly to those of us in this room who know that this is not how God works. But this idea of the prosperity gospel does sound nice doesn't it? Answers in black and white make much more sense to us than an invitation to the mystery or the gray spaces of life. Even if in our minds we know that the prosperity gospel is not how God works in this world, I do think we can easily get sucked into an idea of a transactional God. If we are good enough, if we pray hard enough, if we follow the rules, then God will do whatever we want God to do for us.

It's easy to get sucked into this mindset, even if we disagree with it. And the truth is, I think all of us in some ways believe that if we curate our life a certain way, set it up for a certain way of being and living, then it's all going to work out the way we want it to. But the truth is, most of us in this room know that's not how life goes. Things can happen that we cannot escape and we are faced with wondering what God is up to.

But we all buy into this ideology a little bit I think, especially in the face of tragedy or grief. For example, when we are faced with someone's pain or diagnosis and do not know what to say or do, we recite tropes that mostly feel good to us. It's as if by offering what we think is a reassuring word will give them the magic healing or reassurance they might need. Just do this, this is why this is happening... if you do this or believe this, you'll feel better.

Anyone ever said or received these lines before when you or someone you loved was at the height of pain, bewilderment, grief, or uncertainty?
"Everything happens for a reason"

“When God closes a door, God opens a window”

“Your beloved died because God needed another angel in heaven”

We know that when we say these words or when they are said to us that they come from a good place...but if you've been on the receiving end, do these words reassure you?

Sometimes there really are no good alternatives or options to what life has placed before us. Sometimes things are really just that bad and no trope or platitude will make us feel better.

These beautiful verses from Romans 8 are sometimes used to offer a quick assurance and hope to ourselves or to people who are hurting or in crisis. One of those lines that I've heard used in this way is from the middle of today's reading. Paul writes, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, those who are called according to God's purpose.” They are predestined and called and justified and glorified.

All things work together for good. There. Doesn't that make you feel better now? All warm and fuzzy? All we have to do is love God and then everything is predestined for those of us who are called.

If we look at this passage from another angle, Paul's words might mean that things aren't going well— that things *aren't* working for good — because none of us *is* truly loving God enough or following God's call. That doesn't sit very well. Even worse is the alternative, that in the midst of <a crisis> the Christian response is a superficial platitude that everything is going to be okay. But everything is not okay....God works all things together for good for those who love God? All things? Even terrible things? Are the terrible things really predestined? Justified? Glorified? Somehow if this beautiful, poetic, reassuring text from Paul is just used to gloss over human-made suffering because it will all be good in the end — well, that's not okay, either. These verses are reassuring if we apply it to something we've already come through and can reflect back and see it all piece together, but in the midst of any kind of pain or difficulty or tragedy, these words can feel like a trap.

C.S. Lewis wrote, “God can make good use of all that happens. But the loss is real.” And I think that's where the mystery and the gray of our faith lies in today's reading. That unlike the prosperity gospel, we do not spout a faith that is transactional and overlooks pain, but knows that life is sometimes hard, that

it does not always go the way we had hoped or planned, and that loss is real. The sin and realities of our world means real pain, suffering and loss. If you've been lucky enough to avoid that kind of pain and loss so far in your life, that's wonderful. But when it comes, because it will, that is where the question of how you engage your faith will come into light. Perhaps the difference for us from the prosperity gospel and what I believe Paul is sharing with us in this passage is that even in the midst of all that's really hard, God abides.

You see, Paul never meant for this passage to be used as one liners to make people feel better. He knows that loss is real. Our former parish associate, the Rev. Dr. Aimee Moiso writes, "In these chapters in Romans, Paul is making an argument about the salvation of humanity through Jesus Christ. Today's passage is the capstone; it is the final reassurance for those who believe and follow Jesus — affirmation of the unshakable love of God, in whom we have hope. This love of God knows our weaknesses and meets us there. It is love that comes to us through the Spirit when our prayers are so deep they are wordless groans and sighs. It is love that is *for* us, it is love *in favor of* humanity. It is love that is present even when it is hard to see, even when there are no good options, and we're out of ideas, and the loss is real, and exhausting, and feels never-ending."

Friends, I don't believe Paul's intention is to justify suffering. I believe Paul is justifying *keeping hope alive* when there aren't good reasons to. It may even be that Paul is arguing that we can't let suffering win; that precisely in the face of suffering is when we need to look each other in the eye and say, "We were told this could happen. Keep hope alive. This is not the last word."

Even in the gospel lesson today and the multiple parables we heard about the kingdom of heaven, blessing and surprise and abundance come from things mostly unseen or unknown but lies beneath and then expands and rises when the time is right...the tiny mustard seed, the yeast, hidden treasure.

And so friends, today, how will you keep hope alive in the midst of hardship, despair, pain or grief? How will you choose to walk in these days where the future may be uncertain, when you live the reality of grief? If we do not serve a God who fixes everything upon our immediate request, then what kind of God do you hope to serve?

If I may offer an encouragement, You are the living and walking embodiment of the love of God in Christ for one another. Our call is to be together-for good. To make room for good to happen and to rise up like that yeast, even when it's hard to see. Not to erase the pain, but to go bear it with one another knowing that there is something deeper that binds us together. Not to share a quick fix but to take the longer and harder road of walking alongside pain and grief to help lift one another up.

I want to close with this blessing and poem by Steve Garnaas-Holmes:

The promise
is not that everything turns out just fine,
but that in all things, even those that go badly,
goodness is working hard for you,
that the spirit that holds everything together
is moving things, unseen for your sake,
that grace dwells in the midst, hovers affectionately,
that love sings blessing, pulses with life-giving energy,
works its magic, evokes beauty and healing.
The promise is that even in difficulties
Love awaits you, *Jacob's Rachel,*
Lazarus' awakening.
And even without a future,
you are accompanied,
made glorious,
cherished.

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.

Amen.