August 7, 2016 Text: Romans 8:28-39 “Safe in God’s Love”

Recently, I have been reading a book written by a woman who walked solo across the deserts of Mongolia. Often, when the frequent torrential storms brought massive winds, chilling rain, and damaging hail, she reports that she would lift her arm in protest and challenge the storm with a question: “Is that the best you’ve got?” Of course, it was not really a question; it was her profound act of defiance.

That’s the tone of these verses from Paul. Look at his questions: If God is for us, who is against us (Romans 8:31)? Won’t he also freely give us all things with (Christ) (Romans 8:32)? Who will bring a charge against God’s elect people (Romans 8:33)? Who is going to convict them (Romans 8:34)? Who will separate us from Christ’s love (Romans 8:35)? Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword (Romans 8:35)?

These are not questions to which Paul does not know the answer. These are strong affirmations made in the form of questions. It is as if he looked at the worst life can deliver and, along with the woman in the Mongolian desert, yelled, “Is that the best you’ve got?”

Right in the middle of these statements of faith, Paul remembers the time the psalmist more or less blamed God for things that weren’t going well (Compare Romans 8:36 with Psalm 44:22.). The writer of the psalm pleads with God “to come to our help,” “to redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love” (Psalm 44:26, NRSV). Paul claims that in Christ Jesus God has answered that plea, and now “nothing can separate us from God’s love” (Romans 8:38).

God’s love comes in many different flavors and shapes. There certainly seem to be times when it is hard to recognize God’s love, especially in the midst of a storm. May God grant such a gift of faith that I can raise my arm in triumph and say to life’s storm: “Is that the best you’ve got?” After all, the worst storm nailed Jesus to a cross and now that cross is empty. Praise God!

What Someone Else Has Said:

When Richard Lischer (Stations of the Heart, Alfred A. Knopf) writes of hope in the midst of the dying of his son, he says “Until that time I was completely ignorant of hope, perhaps because I had never been so desperately in need of it. But that night I momentarily lost my fear of hope, which is nothing other than the fear of death, and remembered again the Bible’s quaint promise, ‘Hope maketh not ashamed.’” I will not be ashamed of my hope.

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God of new beginnings, move into the places of my hurting and bring a presence that will not go away...”


Paul wipes out any notion that God is good to us because we deserve it (Romans 9:16). These verses are like a roll call (perhaps, that should be role call) of Old Testament key figures: Abraham (v. 7), Isaac (v. 7), Sarah (v. 9), Rebecca (v. 10), Jacob (v. 13), Esau (v. 13), Moses (v. 15), Pharaoh (v. 17). That’s certainly an interesting mix of people!

The apostle is underscoring the truth that God’s mercy is a gift from God’s love, not a requirement that God must meet. God’s willingness to show mercy does not diminish God’s willingness to show judgment.

It is of interest to persons in the Wesleyan tradition that John Wesley’s Aldersgate experience took place while he was listening to someone reading the preface to Luther’s commentary on Romans. We do not know exactly which portion of that commentary flipped the switch on Wesley’s assurance of his salvation. It certainly could have been Romans 9:16: “So then, it doesn’t depend on a person’s desire or effort. It depends entirely on God who shows mercy.”

Here is what Luther wrote about that verse. “We are so weak and wavering that, if it were left to us, surely not a single person would be saved, and the devil would certainly overpower us all. On the other hand, God is constant, and His providence will not fail, nor can anyone prevent its fulfillment. We therefore have hope in spite of sin.”

Do you think this is what moved Wesley to feel his heart “strangely warmed”?

Today (the day I write this), I went to the funeral of a childhood friend. As best I can remember I have seen the man only once in the last sixty-five years. I did not know his spiritual journey. The pastor said, “God does not ask us to understand, God asks us to believe. Jack did not always understand, but Jack always believed.”

Accepting the free gift of God’s mercy is certainly beyond our human comprehension. Thank Goodness (and I mean that literally) that God’s grace is sufficient.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In Emil Brunner’s classic The Letter to the Romans (Westminster), the theologian wrote: “(Paul) only wants to say: nobody has a right to God’s grace, least of all they who through disobedience have fallen under God’s wrath...If God grants his mercy, there was nothing that obliged him to do so...It is God’s act alone.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God who gives undeserved love, grant us such grace that we might be instruments of that love in the places of our life journeys...”

Folks who know me pretty well might chuckle a bit at my efforts to grasp the images and metaphors Paul uses in this week’s study text: making bread (Romans 11:16) and doing yard work (Romans 11:16-24). Neither of those is something I do well. (My idea of gourmet cooking is to toast the bread before making a pimento cheese sandwich; my idea of gardening is to read carefully the label on the can of beans I am about to buy.)

Yet, here is Paul writing about the relationship between Jews and Gentiles by referring to cookie dough and olive trees. Both of these references depict things that change, that morph into something new. The child of Israel who believes in Christ has become someone new. The Gentile who believes in Christ has become someone new. And those “new someone’s” have in common their life in Christ. As the apostle says in his letter to the churches in Galatia, “There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Now if you are Christ’s, then indeed you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3: 28-29).

Paul seems a bit impatient with the emerging Church at Rome. Look at Romans 11:11. Look at Romans 11:13. Look at Romans 11:15. Look at Romans 11:18. Look at Romans 11:20. Look at Romans 11:21. Look at Romans 11:24. It is not hard to imagine these words being read with a bit of a snarky tone. The divisions among God’s people really irritate Paul. After all, he is a Jew who has undertaken a ministry to the Gentiles (Romans 11:1, 13). He understands how Christ tears down such barriers, such dividing walls (Ephesians 2:14).

The broken places in the Church today carry different theological and social labels than those addressed by Paul, but the reality of our “choosing up sides” still remains. How are we to live with those whose roots and traditions and understandings are at variance from ours? Paul gives two clues of advice: (1) Be faithful—Romans 11:20 and (2) Be afraid—Romans 11:20 CEB. Maybe Paul is cautioning us against getting over-confident that we have gotten it right while others have gotten it wrong. Sneak over one verse from where this week’s study ends; that’s where Paul advises believers not to think too highly of themselves (Romans 11:25).

What Someone Else Has Said: A statement on United Methodist doctrinal history (Book of Discipline 2012, UMPH) says: “To be ignorant of many things and to be mistaken in some, Wesley observed, ‘is the necessary condition of humanity.’ The crucial matter in religion is steadfast love for God and neighbor, empowered by the redeeming and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God of us all…”

August 28 2016 Text: Romans 12:1-2; 13:8-10 “Love Fulfills the Law”

As I started working on this week’s study text, I was fascinated by the various ways the last part of Romans 12:1 has been translated.

King James Version: “…your reasonable service.”
Common English Bible: “…your appropriate priestly service.”
New Revised Standard Version: “…your spiritual worship.”
New International Version: “…your spiritual act of worship.”
NT of Lord and Savior: “…your rational service.”
J. B. Phillips: “…an act of intelligent worship.”
Knox: “…worship due from you as rational creatures.”
Weymouth: “…a spiritual mode of worship.”
Cotton Patch: “…logical act of worship.”
The Message: “…placing it before God as an offering.”
Contemporary English Version: “…most sensible way to serve God.”
New English Bible: “…the worship offered by mind and heart.”

The word translated “reasonable,” “priestly,” “spiritual,” “rational,” “logical,” “sensible,” “mind and heart” is ἀγαθή; Romans 12:1 is the only time it appears in the New Testament. In turn, that word is derived from ἄγαθος, the term that shows up in John 1:14 (“The Word (ἄγαθος) became flesh and lived among us”). It is as if Paul wants to say that Jesus Christ is the standard by which our lives are measured!

Another word of interest in Romans 12:1 is “service” or “worship.” We speak of having a “worship service,” but maybe we also ought to speak of having “service worship.” It works both ways: we are serving God when we worship and we are worshiping God when we serve. No wonder we understand “liturgy” to be “the work of the people.”

In the closing verses of this study (Romans 13:8-10), Paul makes it clear that “love” (Yes, it is agape love) fulfills what God expects in the law. The apostle uses the word “love” five times in these three verses. There can be little doubt that he ties together how we love God and how we love one another.

What Someone Else Has Said:
Bruce W. Longenecker (The Triumph of Abraham’s God, Abingdon Press) wrote: “For Paul, all that the law was intended to bring to fruition materializes and is fulfilled in manifestations of Christian love.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Loving God, help me to love…”

News

Name Change for One Great Hour of Sharing
The United Methodist Church has renamed a popular special Sunday observance that includes an offering to cover disaster and relief costs. The name—“UMCOR Sunday”—replaces the “One Great Hour of Sharing” title within the denomination. UMCOR is the United Methodist Committee on Relief, a major Protestant humanitarian agency that is part of the General Board of Global Ministries. It was founded more than 75 years ago. UMCOR’s work of alleviating human suffering around the world includes disaster relief and supplies, disaster risk reduction, and humanitarian development. Based on UMCOR.org article by Elliott Wright.

A Worldwide Gathering of Women
The United States will host the 2016 Assembly of the World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women Aug. 31 - Sept. 3 2016. Every five years, members of the World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women gather for a world assembly. The last assembly was held in 2011. The 2016 assembly will be in Houston, Texas. The World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women is a worldwide fellowship claiming more than 3 million members. United Methodist Women is a supporter and member. As members of United Methodist Women, you’re invited to attend! For more information and online registration form go to: http://www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/news/a-worldwide-gathering-of-women. Based on UMW.org article by Tara Barnes.

Every Day Grace Magazine
Issue number three of Every Day Grace magazine becomes available soon. The focus is on the stories of rural eastern NC women. We hope you enjoy this edition. All Vine subscribers automatically receive Every Day Grace magazine. Churches also receive copies of the publication.