

If God Is For Us ...

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. William D. Peterson
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church
Outdoor Worship Service
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Today's Text from Scripture

Romans 8:28, 31-35 & 37-39

NIV

²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him,¹ who have been called according to his purpose.

³¹ What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ³³ Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,² neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Sermon

In the Scripture lesson for this Sunday we can almost hear the voice of Paul – the Apostle to the Gentiles without whose witness Christianity might have remained a small and isolated Jewish sect – rising to a crescendo pitch as he summarizes the faith claims that he has been setting forth throughout Romans chapters 5 through 8.

Using the courtroom-type rhetorical approach which was common in his day, Paul has been building a case for belief in God's ultimate victory over the forces of darkness. His argument was a hard sell at the dawn of the Christian era, just as it remains a hard sell to this day given all the evidence of suffering, and persecution, and hardship for people of faith today.

¹ *Or that all things work together for good to those who love God, who; or that in all things God works together with those who love him to bring about what is good—*

² *neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Imagine, for example, if you were the parent of one of the children killed this past week at a youth camp in Norway, or that a loved one of yours had been killed in the bombing in downtown Oslo. Norwegian anti-Jihadist

Suppose in this case that you had been informed by your faith tradition for years that “God is good,” or that all things God works together with those who love him to bring about what is good (alternative translation of Romans 8:28). but you certainly have to wonder where “God” was on this day when the perpetrator of all this mayhem was not some foreign jihadist, but ironically a blond blue-eyed Norwegian anti-jihadist named Anders Behring Breivik, whose rationale for his actions is that they were “atrocious but necessary.”.

Closer to home and to the lives of those we know, imagine trying to wrap one’s head around an out-of-the-blue – at the worst time possible – diagnosis of a potentially fatal disease.

The Apostle Paul was proclaiming his conviction that God is the ultimate victor even (or especially) in the face of persecution.

Far from seeking to claim that if you accept Jesus as Lord and Savior you’ll become wealthy, or you’ll soar through life trouble-free, Paul is declaring with sincere conviction that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Read again Paul’s list of what he and his fellow Christians had to face as threats to one’s very existence, and you have to recognize that the Christian faith is far from being pollyannish.

Paul phrases his final claim in this way: If God is for us, who can be against us?

Paul is not raising the possibility that maybe God isn’t for us, he is making his case that because God is for us, no one or nothing can triumph over us, given God’s great acts through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah.

Toward the end of the 20th century and following the reunion of the northern and southern streams of the Presbyterian church, a confession was written and adopted by the church that stated this claim as follows:³

In life and in death we belong to God.

So, if our biblical conviction is that GOD IS FOR US!, and our confessional claim is that IN LIFE AND IN DEATH WE BELONG TO GOD, how are we to live?

³ **A Brief Statement of Faith** -- A Confession of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) –
Adopted in 1991

We are to live:

- ▶ Joyfully because we trust in the One who is the giver and renewer of life;
- ▶ Gratefully because we don't have to wait and wonder whether we might somehow become acceptable to God. We have the assurance of God's Word that Jesus the Christ has already done everything required for our salvation; and
- ▶ Watchfully! We live in watchful gratitude and grateful expectation because although we have complete assurance that God's kingdom has come -- and continues to come -- very near to us through the work of the Holy Spirit, it is also clear that God's work is not completed. As Christians we live in a status that might be called, "Already, but not yet."

God's work in the world certainly began with creation, and continued through God's covenanting behavior with Noah, with Abraham, Moses, and the royal line of King David.

The incarnate presence of God through Jesus, brought those who could hear, and see, and follow, to further awareness of God's plans for the way we as human beings were to live with each other, and to behave toward all God's creation.

That's the already.

However, it is clear to any and to all that God's work is not a completed project in this world. As the Confession puts it, we still live in a "broken and sinful" world. We do not live with each other as God intended. We do not behave responsibly toward God's creation in the way God intended. And so we wait --to borrow from the Lord's prayer -- for God's will to be done "on earth as it is in heaven,".

That's the not yet.

We aren't talking about the lives of believers as being lives of sheer endurance. Teeth-gritting hanging on from day-to-day is not the goal for us, even though those who can only barely hold on are not to be despised, for theirs is never a simple task. Rather, the perseverance of the saints is something more -- it is a gift of the Spirit which has a positive and forward-looking goal: the newness of life.

The African American tradition has modeled this forward-looking dimension of faith in a very special way. Beginning in the years of their slavery, they knew this was not the way God's children were to be treated. But they never lost faith that what they were experiencing was not God's ultimate plan. And, even when they were formally freed from slavery but still lived under conditions that denied so many of their rights and trampled on so much of their dignity, they never lost sight of the hope that one day God's will would be done here on earth, as it is in heaven.

Such hope is well represented in one of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s sermons, entitled "A Knock at Midnight," which he based on Luke 11:5-7. Hear with me how he challenged his flock by not simply talking about God's future, but by announcing it.

Dr. King, in his inimitable way said:

The church today is challenged to proclaim God's Son, Jesus Christ, to be the hope of men [and women] in all of their complex personal and social problems....

Midnight is a confusing hour when it is difficult to be faithful. The most inspiring word that the church may speak is that no midnight long remains. The weary traveler by midnight who asks for bread is really seeking the dawn. Our eternal message of hope is that dawn will come. Our slave foreparents realized this. They were never unmind-ful of the fact of midnight, for always there was the rawhide whip of the overseer and the auction block where families were torn asunder to remind them of its reality.... Encompassed by a staggering midnight but believing that the morning would come they sang:

I'm so glad trouble don't last always.
O my Lord, O my Lord, what shall I do?

Their positive belief in the dawn was the growing edge of hope that kept the slaves faithful amid the most barren and tragic circumstances.

Faith in the dawn arises from the faith that God is good and just. When one believes this, he [or she] knows that the contradictions of life are neither final nor ultimate. He [or she] can walk through the dark night with the radiant conviction that all things must work together for good for those that love God. Even the most starless mid-night may herald the dawn of some great fulfillment.

Modeling after the faith of our forebears, be they of whatever color or ethnicity, and enabled by the Spirit, we as believers strive to serve Christ in our daily lives and daily tasks.

If we are engaged in vocations -- whether they be labeled as sacred or secular -- we strive to serve Christ. If we are engaged in living outside or beyond the years of formal vocations, we strive to serve Christ.

[The Full text of the PC(USA) Confession follows]

A Brief Statement of Faith -- A Confession of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) – Adopted in 1991

In life and in death we belong to God. Through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God, and the Communion of the Holy Spirit, we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel, whom alone we worship and serve.

We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God. Jesus proclaimed the reign of God: preaching good news to the poor and release to the captives, teaching by word and deed and blessing the children, healing the sick and binding up the brokenhearted, eating with out-casts, forgiving sinners, and calling all to repent and believe the gospel.

Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition, Jesus was crucified, suffering the depths of human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world. God raised this Jesus from the dead, vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us from death to life eternal.

We trust in God, whom Jesus called Abba, Father. In sovereign love God created the world good and makes everyone equally in God's image, male and female, of every race and people, to live as one community. But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator. Ignoring God's commandments, we violate the image of God in others and ourselves, accept lies as truth, exploit neighbor and nature, and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care. We deserve God's condemnation. Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation. In everlasting love, the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people to bless all the families of the earth. Hearing their cry, God delivered the children of Israel from the house of bondage. Loving us still, God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant. Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still.

We trust in God the Holy Spirit, every-where the giver and renewer of life. The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith, sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor, and binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the Church. The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture, engages us through the Word proclaimed, claims us in the waters of baptism, feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation, and calls women and men to all ministries of the church. In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of people long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace. In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth, praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.