

FIRST LESSON: Jeremiah 29:11-13  
SECOND LESSON: Romans 8:26-39  
July 26, 2020

***“Nothing Can Separate Us from God’s Love”***  
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

The two passages of scripture we read today from the Old and New Testaments are the special favorites of many people. They offer comfort in hard times, encouragement when the present is challenging and courage when the future looks dim. They remind us of who God is and what God plans. Jeremiah says, “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.” And Romans 8:28 is a verse I have turned to many times, trusting that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

The reassurance that God’s plans for us are for good—that God wants to give us a hope and a future and not harm us—is sometimes necessary! When things are hard it can be tempting to think that God has it in for us. No matter how many times we hear that God’s love can’t be earned and it’s all by grace, humans persist in reverting to “God is punishing me” or “God doesn’t care about me” when painful times come. And they do come. The “all things” that Paul referred to are NOT good things. God may be able to bring some good out of them, but the things are still bad. God doesn’t rejoice over cancer or tragedy. God isn’t happy when a marriage is in trouble. God doesn’t call corporate greed, or corrupt government, or acts of discrimination and oppression good. None of these things are good. What God does is promise to those of us who love God that God will take these manifestly “not good” things, and bring something good out of them for us. It is our God who transforms Good Fridays into Easters.

This promise, however, is not for everyone. There’s a clause here. **It’s for those who love God.** And part of the reason for this may simply be because when we have a relationship with God we turn to God for help and give God the circumstances we are struggling with. Atheists don’t do that. Someone who is hostile to God won’t do that. This is a promise we receive through faith in God.

I will never forget an illustration given by a pastor friend in Scotland involving his little boy Robert. Robert was at that time an adorable curly-headed 4-year-old with big eyes. One day Robert’s toy truck broke. He stood holding the truck crying his eyes out. “Robert,” said his dad patiently, “Give me the truck and let me see if I can fix it for you.” But Robert refused to let go!

Instead he clung even tighter to his truck and cried louder. “Robert,” dad patiently explained, “If you don’t let go, I can’t fix it.”

God can only work in our lives when we let go of the things troubling and burdening us and give them to God. As long as we have a death grip nothing will change. And our refusal to let go usually involves trust. We don’t trust God enough to take the burden from us and make it better. We either think God will do something to harm us, or that WE have a much better idea.

Now don’t get me wrong. Giving God our burdens is not an abdication. I’m not supposed to just sit around passively waiting for God to take care of things. God will provide the means to pay my bills, but God is not going to directly pay my bills. When we give things to God we become a partner with God. Sometimes there is nothing we can do, and like little Robert, we just have to let go of control absolutely. But other times God will nudge us into action and guide us along the way to bring about change or resolution, often in ways we would have never thought of on our own. And God can open doors that we cannot. God can work in other people. We can’t do that.

Paul then goes into a litany describing our relationship with God that gets us into some pretty deep theological water. Paul says that God, foreknew, predestined, called, justified and will glorify us. We’d need the next year to do this justice! But given our attention deficit problems at the moment, instead I’m going to give you a two-minute lesson on his original Greek words:

“Foreknew” means God knows who is going to choose to serve God ahead of time. God knows all of our choices without pre-determining them. This makes sense, because God exists outside of time.

Predestined means to pre-determine the boundaries or limits of something. If there is going to be a ball game played in the local park, the managers have already marked the area out in advance. We are predestined to be conformed to the image of God’s son, Jesus. The theological argument here is whether or not God pre-determines who will have saving faith and who will not, or if God simply pre-determines that salvation is found in Christ.

To be called is to be invited or summoned.

To be justified is a term borrowed from the legal world. It is to be made righteous, acquitted of the crime, and cleared of all charges.

And finally, to be glorified is to be honored and valued.

So, God knows ahead of time who will have faith because God exists outside of time. God decided ahead of time to send Jesus because God knew we would screw up. God invites us into a relationship through faith, and God then completely clears us of our guilt through Jesus. Finally, God will welcome us home as an honored member of the family. It doesn’t get much better than that.

So, says Paul, given all of these wonderful promises, what more can anyone say? If God is for us, who can be against us? God did not spare God’s own son! Who can bring a charge against us? It is God who has acquitted us. Who can condemn us? Jesus died for us so that there is no more condemnation. In fact, if God is for us, **it pretty much doesn’t matter who is against us.** Or as the abolitionist Wendell Phillips once put it, “One, on God’s side, is a majority.”

Paul is not offering us a Pollyanna world in which everything will be lovely and trouble free. What he is giving us is a divine perspective. We can only see from the position in which we find ourselves. We don't know what is ahead. We don't have any idea of the eternal ramifications of what we are experiencing now. But Paul reminds us that no matter what we are going through—trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger or sword, nothing can separate us from God's love. Our eternal destiny is secure. We are more than conquerors because we are abundantly and completely loved.

The reality that we are facing right now can be literally life or death. Doctors and nurses working in hospitals overrun with cases of Covid19 confront the possibility of death every day. But as horrendous as this situation is, it cannot separate us from God's love. A pandemic cannot do it. There are both evil spiritual forces and evil earthly rulers. They have power, but not the power to stand between us and God. Tyrants can kill the body, but they cannot kill our eternal connection with God. Political chaos, extreme partisanship and authoritarian injustice cannot do it. In point of fact, Paul points out that neither things present nor things to come can separate us from God's love. Not any force of nature or any created thing has the power to do this. God's commitment to us is total. God's plan for us is good. God's vindication of us is planned. And our welcome home as an honored and blessed member of the family is already set in stone, because God loves us.

When things are tough, it's sometimes hard to remember that God is on our side. But no matter what life throws at us, this is the truth we need to hold on to. God loves us so much that God sent Jesus to rescue us. Nothing is greater than that. We can survive our struggles through God's grace, and be more than conquerors. Amen.

Jeremiah 29:11-13

**11** For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. **12** Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. **13** You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

Romans 8:26-39

**26** In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.**27** And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

**28** And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. **29** For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. **30** And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

**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? **36** As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;  
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

**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, 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.