

“For the Love of God”

Romans 8:35-39

**First Presbyterian Church
July 26, 2020**

“In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” How many folks here or watching at home feel like we are more than conquerors right now, in all these things we’re facing? I’m guessing none.

And yet the Apostle Paul is clear in saying that we are conquerors – victorious – even amid the dangers and struggles we’re facing right now, dangers and struggles I need not even mention, they are so in-our-face, literally in our face, and in our hearts as we know and see the struggles of friends and loved ones trying to map out the next four or five months.

Interestingly, Paul does not say we will be conquerors. He says we are already conquerors, already destined to come out OK. How can he say that? I mean Paul has quite a lists of the things that threaten us – hardship, distress, persecution (being treated unfairly), famine and nakedness (being hungry and homeless), peril and the sword (weapons of war and threats of physical violence). These are not just imagined threats for Paul or for us.

At the time Paul was writing this, he was preparing to fulfill a difficult and dangerous mission, delivering the collection to the church in Jerusalem. That could cost him his life at the hands of zealots, radicals who did not want the tent of God’s love expanded to welcome outsiders.

After all, the Jewish leadership had a working relationship with the Roman Empire, and this afforded them certain rights and privileges not given to outsiders. By bringing Gentiles into the faith, Paul threatened Jewish solidarity and purity. And then there’s the even bigger threat from Rome. The gospel of Christ was in direct opposition to the Roman Empire. The emperor of Rome was considered a god to be worshiped above all else.

This is why Paul writes such encouraging words to the faithful in Rome, so that they know the outcome is assured, no matter what danger he’s walking into, no matter what danger they themselves are facing. In Christ, they will be OK, and not only OK but they are already victorious no matter how things look right then! So, what does this mean for us?

Well, the way I relate to this – and maybe you can relate to it, too – is to think back to my greatest struggle in life, which was when my weight was out-of-control and my self-image was hopeless. As I’ve mentioned before, I grew up the fattest kid in school – there’s always one, and that was me. When I got married at age 28, I weighed 285 pounds and had a 52-inch waist. I hated my body, and had fought it all my life.

Then one day, I gave up. I couldn't fight it anymore. I decided to embrace my body, no matter its shape, no matter how big and heavy I was. I decided that, while I hated my body, God did not. He made me after all. And from that moment on, instead of focusing on dieting and losing weight, I focused on pleasing God. I focused on healthful living, doing things that I knew to be healthy, even if I couldn't lose any weight. Things like taking a little walk, and eventually getting help with my eating habits.

The key to my recovery was and still is knowing that no matter what my body looks like today, as long as I'm focused on healthy habits, the body God created me to have will show up, it's already a certainty.

Just like our victory in Christ, it's already here, and all I have to do is get out of the way and allow God to reveal to me and all the world who he created me to be. "In all ... things," says Paul, "we are (already) conquerors through him who loved us." It is certain, and all you have to do is get out of the way and let God reveal to you and all the world the victorious person God created you to be, even amid all that threatens our peace and safety, today.

What an assurance! Thank God for Jesus Christ, because, it is in Christ that we have this victory. Specifically, it is in the love of Christ. If you want to tap into the power of God to transform your life and give you peace in the face of all struggles, focus on the love of Christ.

"Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" says Paul, and then he lists all the threats that he and the faithful are facing – hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril and the sword. These are the same things Jesus overcame on the cross – hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril and the sword! We need not fear what Christ has already overcome.

Then Paul says this. He says, "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.

This is not a hope that Paul has. This is a sure and certain reality, today. Paul is absolutely convinced that no one and nothing in all the universe is stronger than the love of Christ, a love that binds us to God and one another, and brings us all the blessings God has in store for us.

Remember the statement, "If you love something, set it free"? If you love something, set it free. If it comes back, it was and always will be yours. If it never returns, it was never yours to begin with." Well, here's an updated version that gets at the same truth about love. "If you love something set it free. If it comes back, it's yours. And if it just sits in your living room, messes up your stuff, eats your food, takes your money, and never behaves as if you actually set it free in the first place, you either married it or gave birth to it!"

That is the power of love! It's the Spirit of divine love, which binds us to God and one another in the blessings Christ Jesus.

While we are not called to die on the cross like Jesus, we are called to make sacrifices in the Spirit of Christlike love, giving of ourselves to our families, our friends, our church and our community. And just like God was faithful to Jesus in raising him up to new life, God is faithful to us, promising us new life in Jesus Christ, both here and in the world to come.

The only thing that can get in the way of the new and blessed life that God promises us, is us. God loves us so much that he set us free, giving us the freedom to love him, or not. And in that freedom, we have the power to turn away from God, and the power to turn toward God.

Sadly, we live in a world – in a country – where too many people have turned away from God's will. It's so prevalent, that it's hard to know who's right and who's wrong, unless you focus on the love of Christ.

When we focus on the love of Christ, we know that God has all of this well in hand, and that God's will will prevail, even and especially in all that this world is facing right now.

And for us as individuals, for those who turn toward God – for you when you turn to God in your actions and decisions, moment by moment – the outcome also is certain; you will attain the greatest blessing God has for you or anyone else – an abiding sense of peace and joy in all things. Take a moment right now to breathe, breathe in that peace and joy.

Whenever you are facing hardship and struggle – whatever you're dealing with right now – turn toward God, rely on Jesus, and breathe in that sweet, sweet Spirit of a peace and joy that cannot fail. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

O God, you are worthy of all our praise and worship. We celebrate your love and our relationship with you through Jesus Christ. Thank you for expressing your love for us in so many ways.

As we think of your love, we are reminded of your call to love those around us. Help us to discover that the more we give ourselves to you, the more we have left to give ourselves to others.

We pray you Spirit of love and care and concern upon those who need you in this moment, those dealing with illness and disease, those suffering a lack of food and shelter, those feeling threatened by forces beyond their control, those lost and in need of your Spirit to guide them.

We pray all this in the assurance of your abiding Spirit, given to us through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who taught us to pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen**