**July 27, 2014 – 7th Sunday after Pentecost**

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As most of you know, I almost always preach from the Gospel reading for the day. It’s not a rule or anything. In fact, on occasion we were encouraged in seminary to stray from the Gospel into the epistles or Old Testament, to make sure we remember that there is a lot more in the Bible besides those four books, important as they are. But I usually choose the Gospel because that’s where Jesus’ own words are most predominate.

But today, with apologies to Jesus’ five lovely parables in Matthew, I want to focus on Paul’s letter to the Church in Rome. The main reason for this is a little self-indulgent because this passage from Romans ends with what may be my favorite verses in the entire Bible:

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.

But before we get to that, I want to talk a little bit about Paul’s letter to the Romans in general. For those of you where in the Bible study we did on Romans, some of this will be familiar. Romans is the last letter that Paul wrote, at least that we have a written record of, although it’s the 6th book in the New Testament. This is because the New Testament is basically listed in order of size, probably to facilitate putting them in codex or book form when that kind of thing was all done by hand.

Although some letters attributed to Paul are in dispute regarding whether or not Paul actually wrote them, there is no such dispute about Romans. It’s considered to be Paul’s theological masterpiece, which isn’t surprising considering he’d been at this apostling thing for twenty years by the time he wrote this letter in about 55AD.

Since Paul had mostly been teaching and preaching around Greece and Asia Minor, he wasn’t the one who started the Roman church. In fact, he had never actually even been to Rome, but he was looking forward to visiting on his way to a projected visit to Spain to work with some churches there. Visiting, and maybe straightening them out a bit. But that visit never took place because Paul ran afoul of some Roman authorities and was arrested for the final time and ultimately executed.

The Roman Christian community was originally made up of both Jews and Gentiles until all of the Jews were expelled from Rome for disrupting the peace under Emperor Claudius in 49 AD. They were allowed back in in 54 AD after Claudius had died and Emperor Nero took over, but the new configuration of the church had a lot of problems. It was these problems that Paul sought to address when he wrote.

The main source of the problems was disputes between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians over a number of issues, which threatened to tear the entire group apart. Much of Paul’s writing addresses their community life together. He also talks about no longer living under the law, meaning the Torah for his Jewish audience, but rather being justified as a gift of God through faith, and he talks about the Gentiles being grafted onto the original vine that was the Jewish covenant with God.

This passage we heard today is like a little interlude in the middle of the letter. He doesn’t address his big themes in this passage, but rather he speaks very personally to the Romans about what may have been their fears and worries.

The Spirit helps us in our weakness, he says, and intercedes with sighs too deep for words. This is such a beautiful idea. When we’re at our weakest, our lowest point, the Spirit is there to pray to God on our behalf. How many times have we felt so sad or so afraid or so angry that we couldn’t even pray? It’s comforting to know that our prayers are reaching God’s ears anyway, and in their most perfect form coming from the Holy Spirit.

The next section sets up one of many logical sequences that Paul uses throughout Romans. It starts out with, “…all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” That makes good theological sense and isn’t particularly extraordinary. But then he goes on, and it’s good to read this passage slowly:

“For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.” In other words, we all have been part of God’s plan for salvation from the beginning, and that plan involves us taking on the divine nature of his Son. That’s huge!

And the reason for this conformation, and the Greek word here is *symorphos*, which means to have the same inner essence and identity, is so that Jesus might be the firstborn of a large family – all of us. We’re not just saved – we’re adopted! Even huger!

And then he ends that section with the sequence I told you about:

And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

So God’s plan for all of us all along has been to transform us into the image of his Son and take us in as his adopted children. At this point my mind starts to boggle at the implications of this in our lives.

Apparently Paul’s mind started to boggle, too, because he brings us all abruptly back to earth by laying out what this choice on our part might mean in the short term, in terms of the hardship and persecution that following Christ can bring. But even as he’s laying this out in somewhat gruesome detail, his confidence in God’s love for us and protection of us shines through.

“If God is for us, who is against us?” That pretty much says it all. But he goes on to say, “He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?”

Then he says, “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” This is pretty much a laundry list of all of the stuff that Paul himself had endured up to this point – all except the sword, and I’m pretty sure he knew that that would be in the cards at some point, because he goes on to quote those happy lines from Psalm 44: "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

And then we finally get to my favorite verses, where he answers his own question:

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 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.

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I don’t think it’s any accident that this passage is almost exactly in the center of the letter. Ultimately, this idea is at the very center of our life in Christ – the knowledge that there is absolutely nothing on earth, or in all of creation, that can separate us from God’s love for us through his son Jesus Christ.

Sometimes, and especially when it’s been such a hard week like this one has been, I forget this basic truth – that God loves all of us with a love that surpasses anything that we can even understand. Sometimes it seems like God is far away, like he’s washed his hands of us.

It’s at those times that we most need each other. We need to reach out in love to each other to remind us of, and reconnect us to, that first and greatest love. In all of our encounters, we need to start with love. When we’re feeling angry or frustrated or frightened, we need to love even more. And if there are times when we can’t feel that love, remember that the Spirit is there, speaking on our behalf with sighs too deep for words and love to deep to understand.

And know that, no matter what, God loves you.

Amen.