

Sunday, July 26, 2020

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Paul's Letter to the Romans 8:22-39

We Are MORE than Conquerors?

INTRODUCTION:

The Apostle Paul was really quiet a genius when it came to constructing practical methodology and. Paul shows us how to turn abstract theology into tangible practice. His interpretation of Jesus life, death and resurrection framed the meaningful organization of practical Christianity. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his brilliant treatise that we call, *Paul's Letter to The Romans*. In this letter Paul systematically lays bare all that he has learned and connected after years of planting churches. In this letter, he offers a radically new way of understanding God. Like a passionate defense attorney giving the final argument, he pulls together and articulates exactly what it means to follow Christ and how to live with a sustainable hope, even in times of immense trial.

If your soul is weary too, chapter 8 offers astounding words of hope and promise. As you listen, or read along, imagine this was written to us today. Imagine that Paul sees the threat of the Climate Crisis, the social and personal trauma caused by a raging pandemic, and the ever-escalating racial tensions. Imagine Paul sees the world we live in today and writes this to the Church.

Hear this reading from Paul's Letter to the Concordians (and surrounding communities) Chapter eight verses 22 through 39.

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**SCRIPTURE READING** Romans 8:22-39

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit [of God] intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? 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? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

As it is written,

"For your sake we are being killed all day long;  
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

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.

The Word of God for the people of God.

## SERMON

### We Are MORE Than Conquerors

*Ever-present God, where there is chaos You bring new order and from the ashes of every death...new life. Set your Holy Spirit upon us this morning. In this time of confusion and disorientation, may Your Word give us insight, understanding and hope. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to You, our rock and our redeemer. AMEN*

A few weeks before we went into this quarantine lock down in Massachusetts, I prepared my family and myself for a very edgy adventure. I thought, "This will be a kind of frontier experience!" (forever optimistic!) After all, no one alive today has ever been through anything like this before. This *new frontier* idea got very real when the entire paradigm and flow of how TriCon Church functions day to day, week to week and year to year was suddenly rendered irrelevant in the *new frontier*. We had to carefully re-think and design, build and urgently implement a new paradigm for how we might continue to be the church in this uncharted terrain. On the night we closed the building I remember lying awake, wondering how will we possibly get through this for an entire month! Well I don't know about you, but at week-19, I still adjusting and adapting. To tell you the truth I'm *more* than weary of all of it. I

don't think I'll ever grow accustomed to the way we have to live these days. Maybe it me, but I have noticed that the longer social distancing goes on, the more people seem to increasingly on edge. It's like a simmering anxiety that has subtly crept into our souls. I know that I am more irritable and unsettled. I get easily agitated in the uncertainty. Adapting to this frontier life is difficult. For instance, I'm not really sure if I'm "working from home" or "living at work." The lines get blurred. Back in March, so many plans and expectations instantly vaporized, and even now, planning anything down the road feels like a pointless endeavor. Also, for me, the daily news cycle stokes dry wood on the blazing inferno roaring in my soul. It's a daily barrage of horror, abysmal behavior, acts of injustice and violence. We may be a divided nation, but we all seem to be *outraged* a lot. With so much happening to us, so quickly, I think our hope begins to quietly fade away in the barrage of chaos. Our faith in any kind of future seems impossible to envision. (just ask any teacher preparing for fall.) We can't even imagine when the next time will be that we get to hug another person or share a quiet meal in a restaurant.

None of us chose to be in quarantine. We were thrown in overnight. Some people like me, crave solitude. In solitude I am reenergized and feel spiritually centered and in tune with all things. But this involuntary isolation is a completely different animal. We know that periods of isolation are effectively used to punish people into altering their behavior. It's the penalty box, the "time out" punishment. Long periods of solitary confinement can acutely challenge your very purpose in life. Those mission critical issues and expectations of fulfilled dreams that provided a sense of meaning and purpose in February have now faded into a foggy morass. Our sense of choice and agency has been severely curtailed. The loss of freedom that we relied on to order up our own destiny has evaporated, and, for many, a dark loneliness is seeping into the void once occupied by purpose, plans and anticipation. Feelings of meaninglessness can lead to depression.

We feel stuck on a threshold between what was and what will be. This is often called the *liminal space*. It is as if we suddenly stalled out on the freeway of time.

This in-between place is always anxiety producing, and on top of that, isolation is the perfect cover for a master thief who relentlessly steals away our hope piece by piece. Little by little hope lessens and you don't even know it's happening. And then one morning your soul is groaning and rescue seems impossible. If you know what I'm talking about, please know that feeling this way is not your fault. This is normal human behavior at times like this. It's a slow working poison that requires an effective and enduring antidote. Fortunately, unlike the elusive search for a COVID vaccine, we already have a recipe to work with.

Remember that the Apostle Paul was writing to *us* this morning, and he insists that the true antidote recipe is imbedded within our sacred texts. In these stories, poems and writings, Paul discovered consistent threads or wisdom that all pointed to a truly sustainable hope, no matter what may come. It was the story of Jesus that brought it all into sharp focus. In Jesus' life, death, and resurrection Paul found a perpetual healing tree of hope, rooted deeply in God's ongoing redemptive promise for all people. The son of God became human to walk in solidarity with our suffering. He dramatically demonstrated how Love will conquer every

storm this life can give. Today's suffering is never the end of the story. Good Friday is beyond horrible, it feels like the end but Christians know that Easter is coming. Love will always come to the rescue!

Paul also teaches us that our agony and groaning in these liminal spaces can be understood as the necessary LABOR PAINS signaling that something new and pure and good is about to be birthed. Instead of being sucked into the abyss of despair, Paul says we can actually rejoice in our suffering. Maybe imagine the joy of a newborn baby! If we can trust in the God who rescues and have eyes to see that chaos is simply a temporal necessity, our hope becomes a spiritual flak jacket. No matter what slings and arrows are hurled our way, hope becomes the sustainable condition of our soul! Paul teaches us that it is the very Spirit of God that is strengthening us through these trials. Divine strength is silently moving us ahead through the labor pains. The Spirit of our Living God strengthens us in the broken places!!!

This is why he says that "we are more than conquerors" because WE are not the ones who conquer anything. The God of Love, The God of Justice and The One who is always faithful will conquer every evil; the evil within and the evil without. For followers in *the Way of Jesus*, this the radical trust is the way of true peace, even in the center of chaos. It is simply a matter of trust! Can you trust that, (eventually) 'all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose'?

We still groan. We are still in labor. We still grieve our losses and yearn for a better day and work to co-create a better day. But what pulls us through, is not trusting in our own ingenuity, education and resources. In the book of history, human kind is never the hero. What pulls the Christian through the agony of every labor pain is the Spirit of God, invisibly, lovingly sustaining us with every breath. She knows our struggle, she is in solidarity with our pain, but she also knows what is on the far side of this battle. She knows that the undoing of our soul is the beginning of the soul's renewal. This is the great cosmic circle, repeated over and over again in history, in scripture and in nature itself; order, disorder, reorder.

We can never really be stalled in time any more than an ocean can stall the tide. Even now, the cosmic big wheel is turning, and the Spirit coaxes us forward saying, "do not fear. I am with you always". This is why Paul says, "we are MORE than conquerors." Paul is convinced that there is a glorious outcome ahead and it is as inevitable as the tide. Beyond those dark, menacing storm clouds is a new horizon that offers hope, renewal and the miraculous birth of something new and pure and perfect and more beautiful than we dare to imagination.

What are you battling these days? Isolation fatigue? COVID coming to your house or someone you love? Whatever your battle, whatever your grief, whatever your hardship or distress, if you can truly believe that God is actually **for** you, you will be like a tree that is deeply rooted and inextricably intertwined in a vast, diverse forest. The Spirit holds us together and freely offers every one of us the sustenance to grow in faith and nourish our roots in the rich soil of trust. The only ingredient needed from us, is simply our assent. The roots deepen, we bend with every storm but we will not be moved.

At week 19, our ability to bend with a barrage of gale-force storms has been tested. We may be weary, but our roots held fast. And yet, to be honest, the immediate horizon still looks ominously dark. Maybe we cannot yet see it, but we know that Aslan is on the move. God isn't finished with us yet. This chaos is the launchpad for the reorder, and it is lifting off even in this moment. This is the kind of enduring hope that is "convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor COVID-19 nor hate groups, tyrants, racists, powerful bullies, self-interested politicians or anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

People of God, our labor pains are real. This is a hard time of trials from every direction. God offers us Divine hope to guide us through. All we need do is assent to be strengthened by the Holy Spirit. Those who are convinced that the God of Love really *is* for them, can live everyday with authentic joy. Every fear, all evil, and misplaced anxiety is defied. This is how we are more than conquerors... Love always wins. Amen