

“God’s Enduring Love”

(a sermon based on Romans 8:24-39, page 158 in the New Testament, NRSV pew Bible)

by

Rev. Dr. Paul A. Lance, Pastor
Seaside Community Church (United Church of Christ)
22940 Ocean Avenue, Torrance, California 90505

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Faced with the groaning of Creation and the *enormity of problems* surrounding us, coupled with our sense of *personal frailty*, every sincere believer sooner or later will ask themselves: “What can I do? *Little me. I’m just a tiny, human unit in a world so vast, facing problems so great.*” To this, the Apostle Paul says: “*The Spirit helps us in our weakness.*”

Tapping into God’s Spirit helps us. *How?* For starters: we see only parts of any given problem, and we are unable to correctly *analyze* the whole; *it’s bigger than we are able to grasp*. But God is involved in every event in its *totality*, in its *actuality*; with omniscience, seeing all the sides and knowing all the players. So we ask God to *inspire us*, to *guide* us; to point us in a direction for the good and the flourishing of all. Left to myself, I’m not sure I’d know what that would be. But God does! So I say: “May *Thy Will* be done, *on earth* as it is in heaven. Lead us...”

St. Paul specifically points to one weakness: *our inability to pray* intelligently about the situations in which we find ourselves, especially when they are threatening, traumatic, or in some way *fearful*. It’s pre-cisely then, when words fail us, that God’s Spirit “intercedes” for us, pleading with sighs too deep for words, tapping into our innermost core.

Sometimes, I suspect, we cannot pray because we cannot “find the words” to express the deep need that we feel; it’s too vague, unclear.

But those feelings *are known* to *God*, who is *with us* (always) and *for us* (who knows us & loves us, and wants only the best for all God’s creatures). It is the Holy Spirit *within* each of us, says the Apostle, that will wrestle with those feelings, and will respond with sighs & groanings *too deep for words*, but which invites *God* to be a part of our experience.

So, when the Apostle Paul says that *we believers “do not know how to pray as we ought,”* it isn’t because we don’t have a prayer book, or don’t know the right words to use, or don’t know how to express our petitions to God. It is moreso because we don’t *believe* that *God is with us just then*, in our moment of struggle, in our place of suffering, in our deep dilemma. It is as though we don’t know *what* the Will of God *is* for us, that keeps us tied up in knots... and unable to *release it* and to relax.

But *God knows what we need*, and *God is with us* even when we don’t feel it. God’s loyal love, enduring love, ever-present steadfast love will “intercede for us” – filling that empty place, where we feel a sense of isolation from God, abandonment, loneliness and longing for God. Our inadequacy in prayer is in *not trusting* that God is with us... and for us. So, Saint Paul tries

to convey to us a sense of deep *interconnectedness* between God's *Will* and God's *Spirit* and God's creatures... you & me.

It is from that *conscious integration of God's presence in our lives* at the point of our deepest need that our "redemption" comes – where we gain the centeredness, the assurance that *our hope* will be realized. And that begs the question: *what is our hope?*

What is *hope*? The Apostle Paul says it is *a confident expectation of promised blessings... not now present, nor seen*. This hope is not a wish, it is an attainable goal. It is not hoping for something that's "too good to be true," nor something which is *unlikely* to occur. It is hope for a salvation, a liberation, an unbinding, a redemption, a relief which is *real*, quantifiable, measurable, but (unfortunately) is not yet present.

And so we *await* it. Since our hope is *not yet* our *lived reality* – that is, we are hoping for that which is *not yet* seen, *not yet* achieved – we do so with *patience*, with endurance, fortitude, *not giving in* to the pressures against us, *nor giving up* on our ultimate intention and design. We hope "against all odds" for a glorified body that is free from all sin and sadness, and for a New Creation (a heavenly society, beginning right here on earth!) in which the essence of nature and human nature *is set free* from its *brokenness* and from every oppression that *binds* us.

God, who dwells in the hearts of God's people, who investigates the thoughts and intents of the heart, *knows* the mind-set of the Spirit... for *it is God's own Holy Spirit*, and it is informed by the experience and ministry of God's own Son, Jesus Christ. God knows *every potential possibility* in every issue or event, and certainly God knows the whole response of the Spirit within you and me as we confront our "situation."

So, we're not telling God anything God does not already know! And when we ask (in prayer) for *our preferred solution* to whatever our besetting problem is – when we put into words the "desired outcome" which *makes sense to us* in the small slice of the reality that we have experienced – we must remember that the Spirit of God is pulling together *the whole picture* – all the ingredients, all things working together – as it makes intercession on our behalf in conformity with the good and gracious and just Will of God.

We know, says Paul, that to those who love God, who feel *called* according to God's purposes, God works all things together for good.

To the extent that we express love for God and for God's world *in our attitudes* and in our *actions*, day by day, and we sense that God has a plan (or a purpose or a Will) for the well-being of God's beloved Creation (ourselves included), those *imbedded beliefs* will rise again from within our hearts when we face sudden danger, trouble, or pain.

That's why it is good to pray on our good days, and not just when we need help. If we have known God *beforehand*, before the threat ever arose – even as God has known us from the beginning, and has *chosen* to love us, had *predestined* us for salvation and for flourishing – we will then more easily be able to *trust God's enduring love* and rely on God's inner Spirit when the tragedy strikes, and our analytic mind shuts down, and our words fail us, and our emotions can only sigh... or groan.

What God has decided *beforehand*, before any of us did our first deed or spoke our first word, is to claim us as God's own child, and to bring us into "conformity" with the life and character of Jesus Christ. That's already been *done* for us, by God, at God's initiative, out of love.

That's why I spend so much time preaching from the four Gospels! We'll not be able to grow into the *full stature of Christ* if we don't know *who Jesus was*, what he did, how he reacted under pressure, what agenda he had for the world, & how he went about getting his followers to join his movement & carry it forward in his name when he was gone.

St. Paul says that *God decided beforehand* that those who love God, who feel called by God, who want things to work together for good, will be "conformed to the image of God's Son." That the group that composes the "Body of Christ" will be *like Jesus* in every way. That Jesus would be the "first-born" among many brothers and sisters! "The first-born within a large family" is how the New Rev. S.V. puts it.

In Paul's Judaism, and in other Hellenistic patriarchal societies, to be *the "first-born"* gave one precedence and *priority* in all things. The older brother inherited more than the siblings; the first-born took on a higher rank or position in the family. Many preachers continue to focus on Jesus as the first-born of many brothers and sisters *in order to claim superiority* "over" others, reminding us that Jesus is the "head" of the church, and that no one (nothing) is ever to take *precedence* over Christ.

I can live with that, for Christ *is* the "head" of the Body of Christ. But I'd like to remind you of the more *important* (although almost ignored) meaning of saying that "Jesus is the first-born among many brothers and sisters." Namely: you & I are sisters and brothers of Jesus! And we are expected to grow up into *the same kind of person*, with the same living faith and enduring love and energetic hope that Jesus has! It's not so much about him being *ahead* of us, or *better* than us, or with more *status* than us, or *him* at the helm and *us* rowing the boat. No, we are each of us growing into *the mind-set of Jesus*, the full stature and status of Christ, in the eyes of God as "mutual members" of the *family* of God. In fact, when God looks at you or me, God sees us with the same loving tenderness & hopeful desire as God does looking at Jesus himself

And that's why God has *called us*, and has *equipped* us, and has even *acquitted us of our sins*... That's why God invests us with the very Spirit of God within us, to help us find the words and the ways that will glorify God in our lives... even as Jesus was able to do. *God has a plan* to carry out this purpose: to bring all things together for good, to sum up all things in Christ Jesus, both in heaven and on earth. The only *human* response mentioned in this whole long section is that of "love for God."

God can use the groaning of Creation and the longing we feel for some kind of salvation or *relief*. God can use the silent, secret, internal activity of the Spirit. And God can even use *our inarticulate sighing & crying* – those things that demonstrate the depth of our human weakness – and turn them to *good*, if we but love God, *trust* God, *lean on* God.

The Christian faith is founded squarely upon the audacity of hope -- a *confident expectation of promised blessings... not now present, nor seen*. Christian hope is always about an attainable goal; not hoping for something that's "too good to be true," nor something *unlikely*

to occur. It is hope for a salvation, a liberation, a redemption, a relief which is *real*, quantifiable, measurable, and (unfortunately) not yet here.

Paul insists that *God* is the one who designs, and who desires, and who brings about the good that we hope for. Everything that God has put into place is for the salvation and well-being of humankind. The outrageous claim that *God knows us* (in fact, that God *foreknew us* before we even knew ourselves), and that God has *predestined* us for blessing, and that God has *called us* according to God's purpose, and that God has *justified us* (acquitted us), and that God will glorify us... sounds too good to be true, but that's the very *basis* of our *hope*.

Since no human act was needed set this plan in motion, no human act is able to secure our salvation; therefore, we can rest assured that no human act can *jeopardize* God's steadfast, enduring, empowering love. If the One who did not withhold even God's own son, but *gave him up for all of us*, will we not with him (and in him) receive everything else?

The Apostle argues from the greater to the lesser. That is: a God who is *so involved in* (and so *engaged with*) redeeming our world as to sacrifice what is most highly honored and deeply prized – God's own self (in Jesus) – if needs be (in utter humility, suffering, and pain, even to the point of death and beyond!), will God not be willing to give us *whatever else we need* to bring to completion that purpose for which Jesus died?

A love as *deep* as that shown to us through Jesus' life and teachings is a love that can be *trusted*. And because God's love is so *relentlessly loyal* toward us and toward our broken world, it creates a powerful bond with those of us who look to Christ for our salvation. God's love is so *enduring*, so *unbreakable*, that we can say with the Apostle: "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus!"

And so we come to the climactic expression of the absoluteness of the bond of love between God and those who love God in return:

*"If God is for us, who can be against us?
Who can separate us from the love of Christ?"*

Will hardship, distress, or persecution? Will famine, or nakedness, or peril of violence? No! In all these things we are more than conquerors through God who *loves us*... who *calls us* according to God's purpose.

Our world may be falling apart around us, but we can be assured of *God's love for us*. The disasters and tragedies of this world (hard to *face* and even harder to *fix*) are *not able* to separate the true believer from the assurance of God's love as known through Jesus *who endured the Cross* with words of *forgiveness* for his torturers, *concern* for his Church and *care* for his mother, who died with *the prayer of Psalm 22* on his lips, and whose Spirit still *energizes* his followers... even to our own day!

Some medical research and empirical studies have indicated that those who *believe in* and *trust* in God are more able to "cope" with the difficulties of life. How is it that we are willing to *confront hardship* & cope with it in more *constructive* ways than those who don't believe?

I think it is because we know something about the nature of reality that skeptics refuse to believe. Namely, that *the God of the Universe is for us*. The Creator of the Cosmos knows us,

and loves us, and has a plan for the flourishing of all Creation. The fact that *at the heart* of all reality is a Spirit of love, *an unbreakable bond*, for “God is love.” And the Good News message of Christianity is very simple: there is no power in the universe that will ever *overpower* the love of God!

God’s love for us is not fickle, capricious, *on* one day and *off* the next. God’s love is constant, abiding, always available, right now & into tomorrow, until *all our tomorrows* lead us into eternity. No age, no time, can ever separate us from God’s enduring love. No place is *nearer to* nor *farther away* from God’s everpresent love. Not even all the wide expanse of interstellar space can ever *sever* the children of God from the *bond of love* from our heavenly Father and to our eternal brother, Jesus.

The One who is Lord over life and death, who was crucified and raised, who is seated at the right hand of God and whose Spirit dwells in each of us... is *with* us. God’s enduring love is *for* us, and *in* us. Amen.