



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
July 26, 2020
Sermon: "So Close, Yet So Far"
Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block
Romans 8:26-29

Romans 8:26-39:

8:26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

8:27 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.

8:28 We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose.

8:29 For those whom God foreknew God also predestined to be conformed to the image of God's Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.

8:30 And those whom God predestined God also called; and those whom God called God also justified; and those whom God justified God also glorified.

8:31 What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?

8:32 God who did not withhold God's own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?

8:33 Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.

8:34 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.

8:35 Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

8:36 As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

8:37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

8:38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,

8:39 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

~

One hundred and forty days. It has been one hundred and forty days since last we sat together in person in our sanctuary - or atrium - to worship God. I am sure I am not alone when I say, this number of days feels overwhelming.

When this pandemic hit home, many of us thought this would last a few weeks. Then, of course, it became a few months. And now we are uncertain about where we are on this COVID-19 timeline, but things don't seem *good*.

It has been hard to be a Christian in the age of pandemic: to be without a sanctuary to call home, to be physically separate from each other, to be left wondering where is God's helping hand "in all this mess." Christians are meant to be in community with one another, and I know there are so many things that we miss about being physically together.

I miss in-person worship...

The early-risers, greeting each other for the 8:15 service.

The sounds of feet big and small rushing to Sunday School.

Those mile-a-minute pre-worship meetings (*I can't believe I miss those*).

The deacons welcoming new and old faces in the parking lot.

The first bell ringing, or note being played on the organ, to start worship.

All of you searching for your ideal seat, squishing together in the pews.

Anxious newcomers being eased by our ushers.

Richard, Marcia and I checking to make sure each other's microphones are on.

Children buzzing about in the pray ground.

The choir harmonizing with all of our voices.

Our individual Glory to God dance moves - some subtle, some bold.

The sound of laughter bouncing off the walls.

Scripture spoken by first-time liturgists.

The different expressions you each have when listening closely to sermons (*I miss your faces*).

The light pouring in from the side windows and through the cross in the center of the chancel.

The taste of shared gluten-free-nut-free communion bread.

The laying on of hands and the power of praying as one.

Handshakes and hugs in the narthex.

Warm conversations and soccer balls being kicked around in the courtyard.

What are some of your memories?

One hundred and forty days is a long time to be wilderness walking (that's a hundred more days than we typically sign up for when it comes to wilderness). And we don't know how much longer this journey must take.

I know many of us are feeling weary and worried and wondering: what will happen with school, and work, and family connection, how many more will get sick, will we ever find common ground as a nation? We have countless unanswered questions about the year ahead, unresolved

concerns about the toll distance is taking on our psyches and our spirits. *What good can possibly come of all this?*

With no shared sanctuary in which to gather, we may be feeling especially separate from one another, helpless and lonely. We may even be feeling ever more distant from our greatest source of hope and healing. We wonder...*where is God in the midst of pandemic? Is God really at work here and now?*

The early Christians had no sanctuary. No building in which to gather. No pulpit. No pews. Christians gathered in homes, *somewhat* like we are doing now. They threw pillows on the ground and took whatever food and drink they had out. And at table with their friends and family and some newcomers, they informally broke bread and shared stories about this divine rabbi called Jesus. They spoke about the miracles he performed, the parables he told, the way he made them feel about God and about the most vulnerable.

Church, at that time, did not know walls. Instead, believers made church where (and how) they could. It wasn't safe to be a Christian out in the open – it was dangerous and radical. They were creating something new – a new kind of worshipping community, a new way to follow God and live out faith in a turbulent world.

Paul was speaking into this *creation* moment. His letter to the Romans carried with it a sense of urgency and revolution. It was dense and passionate and spoke of a world where people of all stripes and backgrounds could sit at table together in the kingdom of God. Through the ages, his words encourage faith in a God, whose love can transform any moment – especially those moments that feel most uncertain, divisive, even hopeless.

Our text this morning from Romans is a portion that many of us have heard time and time again - often read at funerals (or services of witness to the resurrection). It is a comforting text that speaks about God's steadfast presence in our lives. But in the age of pandemic, of days and days of wilderness walking, we wonder: what good is this text to us now? How are we to truly trust that God is busy at work today?

Paul writes:

“We know that **all things work together for good** for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose.” (*Romans 8:28, New Revised Standard Version*)

When I came across this line of text last Wednesday, I shuttered a bit. “All things work together for good?” I thought. “What could be *good* about this time in which we are living? Does God not see what is going on here – is She *that* out of touch, *that* distant?”

This is the sort of line that has been used time and time again to say: “Hey, everything is going to be fine.” “All things happen for a reason.” “Chin up! It will get better.” “Dry your tears.” Lines like this have had the capacity to cause harm to those in the midst of struggle. They don't meet us where we are in the wilderness (they don't name the grief and loneliness we feel). Instead they push us away – encouraging us to quickly recover, think positive, declare “it's all good.”

When I read this line, I knew I could not keep it to myself. I needed to wrestle with it in Christian community. So, I took it to our GCPC virtual Wednesday Bible Study.

Together, across distances and through the power of the Holy Spirit (and Zoom), a group of us sat with this particular line of text. We busted out other translations, and noticed how the difference of a word or two, or a shift in the subject, can transform the way we interpret the passage. All of the translations we found spoke about the power of God love, but varied in the way that *power* is at work creating and transforming the most broken moments. Let me explain (*and forgive me as I briefly nerd out*).

The NIV translation reads:

“And we know that in all things **God works for the good** of those who love God, who have been called according to God’s purpose.” (*Romans 8:28, New International Version*)

In this version of the text, it is not “the things” in our lives that are working for good. Rather, it is God who is doing the heavy lifting. God is causing good to emerge from hardship.

The Message version reads:

“That’s why we can be so sure that **every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good.**” (*Romans 8:28, The Message*)

Here, it feels like it is “our love” for God that is inspiring and cultivating goodness to occur in the world.

Then, Susan Curtis opened up her Oxford Study Bible and read this translation:

“**God cooperates for good** with those who love God and are called according to God’s purpose.” (*Romans 8:28, Oxford Study Bible*)

Now, this particular translation caused us to sit up in our seats: “God *cooperates* for good.”

That word *cooperates* shifts something.

Suddenly, God is not so far away, not so separate from us.

Suddenly, we are not waiting for God to roll up His sleeves, and make something good happen.

Suddenly God is not waiting on us, human beings, to hurry and mend this divided world alone.

In our Bible Study, across physical distances, we realized together how closely matched divine and human hands are. We need each other - in this work, in this time.

What if we stop waiting for God to sweep us out of the wilderness, to carry us back to the safety of our sanctuary - to life as we knew it? What if, instead, we dare to trust that God is accompanying us on this pandemic road, and that God is cooperating with us – calling us close, inviting us to create something fresh and good *together*?

In his sermon the “Genesis of Love,” Rabbi Jonathan Sacks speaks of God’s wish for us to be collaborators, while reflecting on the Genesis 2 creation story. He writes, “God wanted to give [humans] the dignity of work, of being creators, not just creations. And in case [humans] should view such labor as undignified, God became a gardener to show that this work is Divine too, and in performing it, [humans] become God’s partner[s] in the work of creation.”¹

With outstretched arms, God calls us into loving partnership, into cooperation, into the soil, and into world-shifting relationship – even now, *especially* now.

We know that God has never required Sanctuary walls. God was here long before brick and mortar. Instead, God needs co-creators of sanctuary: disciples who are willing to do whatever it takes to create holy spaces of refuge and transformation, healing and goodness – wherever we are.

Here, at Grace Covenant, I have certainly seen glimmers of human and divine hands closely at work. Without walls and with God’s help, these past few months we have found creative ways to build and sustain community:

We have mastered new technologies and learned a whole new Zoom etiquette and lingo.

We have been steadily growing since we have been worshipping online (we now have a minister of technology).

People of all ages have been engaging in life-giving virtual classes and camps and social distanced work days in our community garden.

We have protested, cried out for justice and reform, and we are now embarking on a journey to dive even deeper into the work of dismantling white supremacy together.

It has been extraordinary to witness all of the ways the Spirit has been moving here.

It has been extraordinary to witness the resilience of this faith family.

And yet one hundred and forty days in, I know it has also been a struggle, a challenge, different for each of us, yes, but a wilderness walk nonetheless, that has left our feet bloodied and blistered – with still many miles to go.

No doubt as we continue to walk down this unmarked path, we will keep finding ourselves homesick for one another. There may even be more moments where we doubt God’s generous collaboration in our lives. It is in these times, that we must turn to Paul once again, to speak from his place of bold faith:

“Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” He asks.

In this pandemic world, where it feels like there are no clear answers, Paul does not hesitate to give us *one* to cling tight to: “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.”

Friends, in a time when we are feeling so separate, so lost, so hungry for connection and hope, we can rest assured that God – and this faith family – are holding each other close, promising to be with one another every step of the way. *Nothing* can shift this, *nothing* can stop this – even when we are too weary to trust this truth.

Our text teaches that God needs us, as we need Her, to say yes to being co-visionaries, fellow builders, traveling companions on this journey towards cultivating something new and good. Our world is divided and ill, and there is much work to do.

Siblings in Christ, 140 days is a long time to be wandering in the wilderness. But no matter where this road leads, or however long it takes, we can rest assured that we do not walk this path alone. We are far apart, yet side-by-side, accompanied by a God who gives us everything we need to create goodness and hope and sanctuary – right here, right now.

ⁱ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: “The Genesis of Love” (Bereishit 5780). October 23, 2019 <<https://rabbisacks.org/bereishit-5780/>>