

“Really?”

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Romans 8:26-39

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This is the final sermon I preached as pastor at Westlake Hills Presbyterian Church in Austin, Texas. The events in Charlottesville, Virginia, had taken place the day before.

Introduction to the text—Romans 8:26-39

Unless God intervenes in my life again, while I will continue my calling in ministry, I am being called to a different form and venue for that calling, and this is probably the last Sunday I will serve in parish ministry. Here’s what I love most about serving a specific congregation: We never get to have a Sunday set apart. Our worship can never be a museum piece or an heirloom. The plans were set for today: It’s my last Sunday—and you have been so full of grace in how you are recognizing that. Plus, you are gearing up for fall programs and electing a search committee. But we don’t get today to be a special, protected, stand-alone day. We never do. We gather for worship for one reason—to be equipped by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

What happened in Charlottesville yesterday was not just bigotry and hate, not just violence (and certainly it was not violence “on all sides” as our government tried to tell us). It was not “free speech.” It was white supremacy—the primal stain on our society made manifest once again by those who want to continue to privilege whites over blacks, whites over Jews, whites over the “other,” whites over anyone who by how they live or what they believe threatens whiteness.

This is an affront to citizens and a direct challenge to Christians. White Supremacy says whites get everything, and everyone else—blacks, Jews, any who are “other”—are disposable.

So... we get to come to worship today—to be equipped. This work doesn’t care that it’s my last Sunday or that you are gearing up for the fall. We need to be equipped with God’s love, and we need to resist this evil which persists in eroding our society. We don’t gather for worship to obtain our individual spiritual commodities so we can go live our life in peace and comfort. We are here to be a community that resists this fear and these lies and this evil, and equipped by God, we are to show forth the love and justice of Jesus Christ. In that Spirit, how fortunate today to have this reading from Romans 8, an unsentimental, equipping text about the powerful love of God.

The renowned writer and actor Sam Shepard, who died last week, famously hated endings. As a playwright, he felt “the temptation towards resolution, towards wrapping up the package, seems to me a terrible trap.”¹ Temptations abound to mangle Romans 8 to fit our needs. To have it make sense of things. To have life fit together neatly. To see a coherent plan in everything...even though this is never the Bible’s aspiration nor faith’s promise.

There is a church leader who said this week that bombing North Korea is God’s will because “it would handle that situation.” *Really?* The news from Charlottesville and my beloved alma mater yesterday is horrific and heartbreaking and brutal and

wrong. Those who love God were injured in that crowd yesterday. This is working together for good? *Really?* In the nineteenth century, congregations heard sermons about slavery that claimed that all would be all right since God was working good through it all. *Really?*

"All things work together for good for those who love God...." On the face of it, I don't agree that all things work together for good when faced with devastating illness of ones we love. We would not quote that to someone in the grip of addiction. We shouldn't dream of speaking that into situations of loss, despair, or hopelessness. "You cannot conceive, nor can I, of the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God" Graham Greene once wrote in one of his novels.² That's closer to the Bible's truth than our manipulation of familiar verses to meet our needs. God's love is real, pervasive, steadfast, and trustworthy, but often, far from fitting things together neatly, that *love* is appallingly strange to us.

What is Paul doing here in Romans 8? Paul begins by using the word *everything*, as in "everything works together for good for those who love God and are called according to God's purpose...." Paul ends here by using the word *nothing*: "Nothing in all creation will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Both the *everything* all working for good and that *nothing* will ever separate us from God's love can lead us to say...*really?* Because between that *everything* and that *nothing*, we live our lives. We participate in the life of the world where the love of God seems often in very short supply. There are days when the reverse makes more sense: that *nothing* is working together for good, and *everything* in the world is at work to separate us from the love of God.

Has Paul stopped digging down to a faith that genuinely sustains us through pain and death and fear and instead gone to work composing sentimental greeting card platitudes? Has he just put on rose colored glasses so he can join those who persistently deny the harsh realities of our world? How we understand this text hinges on how we see the word *good* and how we deeply experience the love of God.³

Romans 8 is a good corrective in a pattern we often sink into in how we think about God. We know life isn't always fair or easy, and we can't have everything we want. But that doesn't stop us wishing that could all change. God can often become the name for how we think that all that can change. Because of Jesus, we hope we get everything we could possibly want forever. That's the deal. God becomes a device that secures for us what we somehow feel entitled to. So, when we get sick or our relationships fall apart or our financial situation collapses or our future prospects look thin, we think the system has failed. Either we haven't been keeping our side of the bargain, or God hasn't. But Paul is saying that was never the bargain.⁴ When he says "all things work together for good," *good* doesn't mean a decent home, a healthy family, a rewarding job, or a long life. Paul has a very specific definition of "good." His definition of good is "looking like Jesus."

Paul gives five verbs that describe the way we come to look like Jesus. God foreknew, predestined, called, justified, and glorified. Paul says, those whom God foreknew "God also predestined," and right there we gallop off into "predestination-world," but listen to the whole sentence! "*God also predestined to be conformed to the image of God's Son.*" In other words, that was what the whole purpose of God among human beings was always all about: making us and remaking us to look like Jesus. That's what *good* means. That's what we hope for. That's the bargain. We get

to look like Jesus.

There is nothing here about having a healthy family or a long and happy life, nothing about having comfort or having a growing church or a growing bank account or safety from loss or protection from pain. Jesus didn't get any of those things—a stable family life or decent home or worldly success or at least a lack of public embarrassment. Nothing about protection, security, or absolute clarity. Jesus didn't have any of those things. This is the deal: we are conformed to the image of Jesus, who was homeless, rejected, betrayed, tortured, and executed. We can't be surprised if we get a taste of these things too. In fact, if we are able to pass by these things, we have to wonder if we're still cooperating with the process of getting to look like Jesus.

The first verses of Jeremiah open with the call of God to Jeremiah. Calls are big deals, and Jeremiah has a right to be honored and excited. Until he hears the deal: "See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." Nothing about honor, popularity, success, piety, protection; nothing about safety, progress, or peace. *Pluck up, pull down, destroy, overthrow...build, plant*. Six actions, four negative, two positive (which is the rough proportion of Jeremiah's life). It describes a life without status quo or comfort or equilibrium, but a life for and with God. A life that foreshadowed the life of Jesus.

That is Paul's biblical understanding of *good*, and it is Paul's lived understanding of *good*. That's how we can faithfully comprehend that "all things work together for good for those who love God...." Of course, understanding that faithfully means we need a deep experience of what the love of God truly is in our life. "My father was a preacher who believed it was important to memorize verses of the Bible," Craig Barnes, president of Princeton Seminary, wrote recently. "On Mondays he'd give my older brother and me a verse written out. We were expected to recite it from memory at the end of the week when our father would point to one of us and say something like 'Romans 8:28.' If we didn't start chirping away with 'for all things work together for good for those who love God,' we'd have to leave the table. By the time I was a teenager, I had memorized a lot of the Bible....I never paid attention to the words. But they were still in me."

Barnes continues,

When I was not quite seventeen, my parents' marriage broke apart. My mother left to live with her sister in Dallas. My father left the church he had started and just disappeared. My big brother dropped out of college, got a construction job, and helped me finish high school. Together we got by. Oddly, my brother and I didn't talk about how our world had crumbled. Mostly that was because we couldn't afford emotion. We were too worried about the next meal and a place to stay. The following Christmas, my brother and I decided we would go to Dallas to visit our mother.

We didn't have the money for a plane or bus ticket, so we did what young people sometimes do when they're not thinking clearly. We decided to hitchhike from Long Island to Dallas. By the end of the first day, we were somewhere in the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia on Interstate 81. It was snowing hard, the sun was long gone, and we stood on the entrance ramp with our thumbs sticking out, on a road that (we learned later) was already

closed. We stayed put on the side of the dark highway in the blizzard. After months of hustling to make our life work, my brother and I were finally forced to talk to each other. We took a stab at describing our situation, but it didn't go very well after I mentioned that we were basically disposable to the people who were supposed to love us. We tried to pass the time by quizzing each other on sports statistics. Neither of us had ever been very good at that. Then my brother pointed to me and said, "Romans 8:28." We spent much of that night asking each other to recite the verses of the Bible we had memorized but never truly heard.

I found myself saying the precious lines of Isaiah 43: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with youBecause you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you." By the time I finished, I was crying. That night a passage about the sustaining love of God casting out fear became the turning point in my life. . . .

When you find God at the bottom, it's possible to enjoy life's highs and lows without fearing you'll fall beneath the love of a Savior. No one can be fully alive, and no one can lead, without getting rid of that fear.⁵

It is a potent temptation, in everyone I have ever known, to think there is a way to experience God's love that exempts us from the fear or the hardship or the loss. I am here to tell you, after 35 years of ministry, that I have yet to meet anyone who has a magical formula to experience God's love except through the fear, through the hardship, through the loss. It's through all of it that we get to resemble Jesus Christ. There are no exceptions and there are no short-cuts.

In that light, Paul exhaustively talks us through no less than 17 kinds of exceptions for why we might think we are in an unusually difficult place. Ready, here are all 17: hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword, death, life, angels, rulers, things present, things to come, powers, height, depth, anything else in all creation. Hardship, distress, and persecution. You could say these are the predicaments we find ourselves in through our own mistakes, the trouble that comes upon us through bad luck or the ill will of others. That is a lot, but there are still 14 more. Famine and nakedness, lack of two of our most basic needs; Peril and sword, danger from adverse circumstances or violent attack; death and life, between them covering most eventualities; angels and rulers, both those who're in charge of this world and the next; things present and things to come, everything our imagination *can* comprehend and everything it *can't*. Finally, powers...and anything else in all creation, just in case we've left anything out.

On this list are *all* things that Jesus himself was exposed to: hardship, distress, persecution, hunger, nakedness, peril, sword, death, life, angels, rulers...and all the rest. Paul gives us a list of everything Jesus went through, saying there's nothing we could go through that Jesus hasn't first gone through. By the end of Paul's list, we're exhausted, but we're also stripped of all our exceptions. All, that is, except one. There's a lurking suspicion in the hearts of many that the problem of being separated from God isn't one of these 17 things. It's that God has turned away from you. That God is punishing you, turning away from you, that God is angry with you or has lost patience with you, or that somehow there is something you have done or simply

someone you are that falls outside God's favor or choice. Paul knows that this fear is the most isolating fear of all. But Paul shapes his whole argument to insist that this fear is finally, wholly, utterly groundless. God isn't against us. Any of us. God is for us—all of us. Why else would Jesus have gone through hell and high water for us?⁶ Jesus' death is proof that God is for us, and Jesus' resurrection is proof that nothing can separate us from God's love. "Here's my list," says Paul. "Bring on yours." But also if the point of life isn't to have a designer degree, home, job, family, spouse, leisure time, friendship circle, church, or fabulous experiences to post for all to see—if the point of life is to look like Jesus, then this is the kind of hell and high water you can expect to go through if you're going to end up looking like Jesus. If you're in distress and you feel God's broken the bargain that was supposed to make you permanently content or safe, you're wrong. There never was any such bargain. The bargain was that you become like Jesus. If you're facing hardship and you think it's because God's against you, you're wrong. God is for you. Always was and ever shall be for you. Nothing can separate you from the love of God. Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing. *Nothing*.

God is with you at every step, and Jesus has faced everything you're facing and you were with God in the very beginning of all things, you are now, and you always will be. And I have learned well that being *with God* in hardship is always better than being separate from God in comfort.

Raymond Carver died 30 years ago at age of 50, after a hard, tumultuous, tortured life that—once he got clean and sober—offered him just a decade of peace and love before he died of a brain tumor. His last poem was just a fragment. It is his epitaph:

And did you get what
you wanted from this life, even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself
beloved on earth.⁷

And God says, of course...*nothing* was ever going to keep you from feeling beloved in my creation. A kindred spirit of Ray Carver, Flannery O'Connor died at age 39 after suffering terribly from lupus for years. In a letter to a friend not long before she died, she wrote: "I can, with one eye squinted, take it all as a blessing."⁸ Of course she did. Because her deep, hard experience of the love of God led her to know that all things worked together to let her become like Jesus. And in a world where nothing can ever separate us from the amazing, mysterious, appallingly strange, powerful, steadfast, penetrating love of God, blessings are everywhere.

Notes

1 <http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/news/peter-travers-on-sam-shepard-the-cowboy-mouth-poet-of-stage-and-screen-w495095>, accessed August 9, 2017.

2 Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock* (Penguin Classics, Reprint 2004).

3 This section and the framing of this sermon owes great debt to Sam Wells' sermon at St Martin-in-the-Fields, London, preached September 25, 2011.

4 Sam Wells' framing of this text, again.

5 M. Craig Barnes, "Finding God at the Bottom" *Christian Century*, (August 26, 2017).

6 Sam Wells' work here, again.

7 "Last Fragment" from *All of Us: The Collected Poems of Raymond Carver* (Visalia, California: Vintage, 2015).

8 Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being: The Letters of Flannery O'Connor* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1979).