

Sermon for Sunday, August 1, 2010

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UNFAILING LOVE

Romans 8:35-39

If we were to liken Scripture to a journey, one of the first things we would notice is that the landscape is constantly changing. The terrain of Scripture leads us at different times through different scenes. Some parts are like a lush meadow, others are like an arid desert. Anyone who's ever started reading the Bible and stalled out at Leviticus knows that, right? Some parts of Scripture are like a storm at sea, while other parts are more like a dense forest. And then there are times, every once in a while, when God, through Scripture, takes us by the hand and leads us to the top of a mountain. He says to us, "I want to show you something", and He pulls back the veil for just a moment, and gives us a glimpse of things we've been looking at all along, but now we see them from an entirely different perspective. Instead of looking at them from the valley in which they take place, we see them from the heights of a great mountain.

The passage we just read is one of those places. Paul has been winding his way up into the foothills, so to speak, for several chapters by now. And as he gets to chapter 8, he starts climbing the mountain. He speaks of the Christian's life in the Holy Spirit, and of the ultimate glory that we will share with Christ. But no sooner does he mention glory than he is confronted with the question, "But what about all the sin and the suffering in this world, Paul?"

But you know, the Bible is not afraid of the hard questions. In fact, God is always the first one to bring them up. So Paul says, "Yes, what about all the sin? Look at our lives! And what about all the suffering? Look at our world! Creation is groaning for redemption. We are groaning for redemption."

And then he gets to verse 31, and he says, "What then shall we say to these things?" He gets us to the top of a mountain, from which we look down on the battlefield of the world, the battlefield of our lives, the sin and suffering, the groaning and death and decay, and he asks us to look at it all and then says, "What shall we say to these things?" And his answer here is no different, in essence, from the answer he gives earlier in the chapter. In verse 28, he says: "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him." Our passage today is essentially a recapitulation of things he's been saying throughout the chapter. He's not saying anything new here. But he is saying it differently. He's taking the truth and applying it to our hearts. We're no longer in the foothills of doctrine. We're on the mountain of God's love.

So as we look more deeply into this passage, I'd like for us to see three things: our relentless struggle, the promise of victory, and the Love that makes it possible. First, we see

Our relentless struggle – In verse 37, Paul says, "In all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." What does he mean when he says, "all these things"? He is, of course, referring to the sufferings of verse 35, but he's also referring to everything he's been talking about in chapter 8. British preacher Dick Lucas sums it up like this: there are two enemies we face. There is the enemy within, and the enemy without. Verses 1-17 speak of our own inner struggle with sin. That is the enemy within. Verses 18-25 speak of our outer struggle with suffering and death. That is the enemy without. So we have the enemy within, and the enemy without. Sin, suffering, death. What are we to say to these things?

If you're not a Christian, what do you say? What do you say to sin? There is perhaps no one that wouldn't acknowledge that there is something desperately wrong with this world. We have global issues

like poverty and racism and war. We have societal issues like addiction and divorce and crime. And we have, of course, the mundane little annoyances that fill our lives: selfishness, envy, resentment and backbiting. How are we to explain these things and what are we supposed to do about them?

Do you say we just need better education? Better science? A better economic system or social system? Is that all we need? To try harder? We've tried all those things and none of them have ever worked. Why? Because they are all working from the outside in. They are dealing with systems and behaviors, but they are powerless to change the human heart. And that's what we need most – to have our hearts changed. So much of our culture's inability to deal with sin is because it doesn't actually understand what sin really is. In fact, many Christians don't understand what sin really is.

We are so accustomed to understanding sin as being primarily behavioral that we miss the essence of sin. Sin is not primarily behavioral – it's relational. The behavior is simply the external manifestation of an internal problem, and the internal problem is a broken relationship with God. Do you remember the first commandment? You shall have no other gods before me. And yet our hearts are desperately hungry for all kinds of things – success, approval, achievement, love – and we put these things ahead of our relationship with God and the Bible calls that sin. Sin is taking anything other than God into the center of your heart and building your life around it. And all the dysfunction and heartbreak and futility of our lives is because of our desperate attempt to find happiness and fulfillment in things that will never truly be able to give it to us.

I don't need to know you to know something very important about you. Whether you are a Christian here this morning or not, I know this much: every one of you has at least one thing in your life you struggle with and you've been struggling with it for years. It is so deep in your heart you may never have breathed it to another soul. In fact, it may be so deep in your heart that you have never even acknowledged it to yourself. It's too shameful, too raw – which is to say it's too powerful. And whether you are a Christian or not, you are tempted to despair over whether you will ever be able to find victory over it. And if you are a Christian, you are also tempted to despair that it may someday be your undoing, that God will look at you and your struggle and say, "Condemned. Cast out. Away. I never knew you."

But it's not just sin. It's not just the enemy within. There is an enemy without as well. What are we to say to suffering and death? Again, if you are not a Christian, what can you say? If this world evolved by mere random chance and if human beings are simply the result of a series of random, uncaused events, then why do we view death and suffering with such horror? If nature is all there is, then why does death feel so unnatural to us?

Annie Dillard wrote a book called *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. She went to live by a creek for a year in order to get close to nature. Instead, she saw the strong eating the weak. She saw the circle of life played out before her eyes, and she was basically horrified. This is what she writes:

"I had thought to live by the side of the creek in order to shape my life to its free flow. But I seem to have reached a point where I must draw the line. It looks as though the creek is not buoying me up but dragging me down. Look: Cock Robin may die the most gruesome of slow deaths, but nature is no less pleased; the sun comes up, the creek rolls on, the survivors still sing. Either this world is a monster, or I am a freak.

Consider the former: the world is a monster. The universe that suckled us is a monster that does not care if we live or die – does not care if it itself grinds to a halt. It is fixed and blind, a robot programmed to kill. We are free and seeing; we can only try to outwit it at every turn to save our skins.

Or consider the alternative. It seems to us that plenty is amiss. So much is amiss that I must consider the second fork in the road, that creation itself is blamelessly, benevolently askew by its very free nature, and that it is only human feeling that is freakishly amiss. The frog that the giant water bug sucked had, presumably, a rush of pure feeling for about a second, before its brain turned to broth. I, however, have been sapped by various strong feelings about the incident almost daily for several years.

Our excessive emotions are so patently painful and harmful to us as a species that I can hardly believe that they evolved. It would seem that emotions are the curse, not death. All right, then. It is our emotions that are amiss. We are freaks, the world is fine, and let us all go have lobotomies to restore us to a natural state. We can leave the library then, go back to the creek lobotomized, and live on its banks as untroubled as any muskrat or reed. You first.”

Do you see what she’s saying? Even if we say that the universe and nature is all there is, we are still horrified and dismayed by the death and suffering all around us. And we struggle with that. If we are not Christians, we struggle with the haunting fear that there is no God at all and we are left ultimately and terribly alone in a cold, heartless universe. But if we are Christians, it’s even worse. Because then we’re forced to face the possibility that God has looked on our misery and grief and decided to forsake us – possibly as a punishment for the horrible sins we’ve committed or even worse, as an expression of utter indifference.

What shall we say to these things? When we are confronted with the sin in our lives, with the suffering in our world, we will all, at one point or another, struggle. But that’s not all we see here. There is also this incredible

Promise of victory – Look again at verse 37. Paul says, “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” Paul looks at the sin, suffering, and death in the world and says Christians are more than conquerors. The Greek is actually just one word – you could even translate it as super-conquerors.

So, let me ask you. Do you feel like a super-conqueror? If you’re like me, you don’t even feel like a mini-conqueror. I often feel like a super-sinner, but not a super-conqueror. But that’s what Paul says we are. Not just what we will be, but what we are. How can that be?

Well, let’s look back again at what he says. “In all these things we are more than conquerors.” There’s one tiny little preposition right at the beginning of that statement that gives us the key. He says, “*In* all these things”. He doesn’t say, “Instead of these things”, or “after these things”, or “in spite of these things”. He says, “*in* all these things we are more than conquerors.”

There is a deep tension in the Christian life between our daily struggles and the ultimate victory that is promised us. There is a deep tension between this fallen world and the kingdom of God that has broken into this fallen world through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In one sense the victory has already been won. But in another sense we still live in enemy-occupied territory.

Now, as Christians, we live with one foot in each world. The problem is, as human beings, we have an extremely low tolerance for tension of any kind, and so we feel compelled to resolve it in one direction or the other. But if we are going to truly experience the power of the gospel in our lives, we mustn’t try to do that. Much of the power for Christian living comes precisely through that tension. We are simultaneously “in all these things” *and* “more than conquerors”.

It comes down to one basic, core question: how do we conquer in the midst of all these things? It's a tricky question to answer, right? Because we are acutely aware that there is no one master plan that every Christian's life conforms to. In other words, it isn't as easy as simply trusting Christ and from then on everything goes swimmingly well. It doesn't work that way. Some people get healed. Other people die. Some people recover from addiction and dysfunction. Others struggle their whole lives. And the temptation is to believe that the ones who got the healing or the victory or the recovery were the ones who were doing it right – they were the ones with faith, who repented of their sins and made use of all the tools that God gives us: studying the Bible, and prayer, and fellowship, and accountability, and service.

But the truth of the matter is that a Christian could do all of those things better than anyone else in the world, and still struggle. And still experience bitter frustration and disappointment because things don't seem to be getting any better at all. A Christian can do all these things and still struggle with sin. Look at Paul. If ever there was a super-conqueror, it was Paul, right? But before we find him on top of the mountain in Romans 8, where is he in Romans 7? The depths of the valley. At the end of Romans 7, he says this: "I don't understand what I do. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from the body of death?" It is possible to do all the right things, and still struggle with sin.

And it's possible for Christians to struggle not only with sin, but with suffering too. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul talks about being caught up in a vision of heaven. Super-conqueror! Paul the super-Christian! But then what does he say? "To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me." I am so glad we are never told what Paul's thorn was. It leaves room for what Paul says next to apply to all of us, whatever our particular thorn may be. Paul says next, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Do you see the tension there? When we are weak, then we are strong. Christ says to you, "My grace is sufficient, it is enough, for you." Are you struggling today? Have you ever asked yourself, "If Christ's grace and power are at work in me, why is my life so difficult?" Have you ever asked yourself that? I have. What are we doing? We're trying to resolve the tension. We think that if we have God's grace in our life, somehow it should be easier. But my dear friends, grace doesn't make the Christian life easy. It makes it possible. You wouldn't be struggling if it weren't for God's grace in your life. You wouldn't even show up for the fight. You wouldn't know there's a battle to be fought. You know our culture, our world, doesn't know there is a sin problem. It thinks there is an education problem, or a poverty problem, or a political problem. But no one wants to look inside their own heart and say, the problem is in here. Friends, it is in the struggle, in the tension that we are super-conquerors. It is in the midst of all these things that God's grace enables us, day by day, month by month, year by year, to show up for the fight. We may get our teeth kicked in every single time, but we keep showing up, by God's grace.

And there are two very important implications here for us as a church. First, we need to make room for the tension in our lives. What do I mean? It's easy to walk into church on Sunday morning, see everyone here looking so good, so perfect, so together, and think, "Hmm, these people all look like a bunch of super-conquerors. They don't look like they struggle. I'm afraid to let them see my struggle." But you know what? We are all afraid of letting others see our struggles. That's why we cover up with our cars and our clothes and our careers. Friends, the church should be the one place in the world where we can bring our struggles, where we don't have to cover up. You may not blurt it out to the stranger in the pew

next to you but it is in these pews and in classes, hallways, and community groups, that you develop the kinds of relationships where it is safe to struggle.

And that leads us to our second implication. We need to make room for the tension in other people's lives, also. Many of us have experienced some degree of healing, or recovery, or victory. Christ has brought us down the road a little farther, and it's natural to want to see others who struggle with the same things to experience the same kind of victory we've experienced. And so we offer advice. We say, "Have you ever tried this? Or have you ever considered that?" And that's good. There is a place for that. We need to be able to speak truth into each other's lives, to be able to challenge them when necessary. But we also need to know when it's time to just listen and hold their pain, hold their struggle, and not try to diagnose it, fix it, or rebuke them for it. There is a time for truth, but there is a time for love also. A time to just be with them in the midst of their struggle and make room for the possibility that God is in control of what's going on in their life. We need to be willing to make room for the tension in our lives and in the lives of others. (John 11: Martha and Mary)

What are you struggling with today? Please don't let your struggle keep you from turning to God. Don't let your struggle with sin keep you from bringing it to the Lord. That's what the enemy wants. He doesn't want you to turn to God. Please don't let your struggle with suffering keep you from bringing it to God. Don't let it make you bitter. But how, you may ask? How am I going to live in the tension between struggle and the promised victory? Lastly, we need to see

The love that makes it possible – Paul says, "In all these things we are more than conquerors." But how? "Through him who loved us." Who is this? It's Jesus. The love that makes it possible is not a "what", but a "who".

Did you notice that in verse 38, Paul says, "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, nor any of these things will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord"? Why does he say, "I am convinced"? Why didn't he just say, "Neither death nor life, etc, will be able to separate us from the love of God"? It stills communicates the same information, right? Why does he say, "I am convinced"? He didn't need to say that. At least not if his only aim was to communicate information about God. But Paul is no longer simply giving us information, he's giving his testimony. He's showing us what happens when God gets personal with you. Paul takes us up onto the mountain because he wants us not just to have an experience of truth, but an encounter with a person.

And so he tells us that "in all these things we are more than conquerors", how? "Through him who loved us." He's pointing us to Christ, the one who loves us. But Paul isn't just reminding us of the one who loves us. The past tense of the verb points us to the way he loved us. He points us to the cross. And here we begin to see that this is not just any mountain to which Paul has brought us. We are no longer in the foothills of doctrine but on the mountain of God's love. We're on Mount Calvary.

If you want to see how the tension between our struggles and our victory is resolved, go up to Mount Calvary. If you want to see how in the midst of all our sin and suffering we can even yet be more than conquerors, go up to Mount Calvary. Look at Jesus on the cross. But don't just look at him there. Gaze upon him; behold him; and cling to him in your hearts and you will see that it was in the most bitter of defeats that true victory was won for you. You will see that there is no power in all creation that can separate you from the love of Christ. Why? Because on the cross, Jesus endured the ultimate struggle so that you and I could become super-conquerors. He took our sin and suffering upon himself, and in so doing turned the most bitter of defeats into the greatest victory the world has ever seen. Remember what Paul says in Colossians 2:14-15? God took all our sins and nailed them to the cross. It was there that He disarmed all the powers and authorities that are against us, He made a public spectacle of them,

triumphing over them by the cross. The cross was a triumph. The most bitter defeat was the most glorious victory. Victory for you. Victory for me. Do you see? Christ was forsaken so we could be embraced. The anguish of defeat is turned into the joy of victory, and when we trust in Christ, our defeats are taken up into his victory. His victory is ours, in our struggles. His love is ours, even when we feel forsaken and unlovable. We are in His love, and it cannot fail to bring us home.

When I was a kid growing up in Southern California, my parents used to take my brother and me to Disneyland. Of course we used to go on the famous rides like the Matterhorn and Space Mountain. But there was another ride, not quite so famous, but which was especially thrilling for me as a little boy. It's called Autopia. It's a speedway, and they give you your own little race car and turn you loose. I loved it because you really got to control the car. You were the one who stepped on the gas and you were the one who turned the wheel. Now, of course, they had to put some safeguards in place and in the middle of the track there's a guide rail. So if you take your hands off the wheel, well, the wheels will grind against the rail, but the car will stay on the track. Not only that, they set the idle on the car very low so that even if you take your foot off the gas, the car will still inch forward. You get the idea. You can take your foot off the gas. You can even take your hands off the steering wheel. But as long as you are in that car, it will take you to the finish line.

Are you in the car? Are you in Christ's love for you? Through faith in his work on the cross are you in Christ's love? Because if you are, then that love cannot fail to bring you home, to bring you to the ultimate victory. Your sin cannot cause Christ's love to fail. Your suffering cannot cause Christ's love to fail. You can no more cause Christ's love to fail than you can walk into an ocean and stop a wave with your hands. And when your sin accuses and condemns you, go up to Mount Calvary. When the pain and suffering of living in this broken world threaten to overwhelm you, go up to Mount Calvary. See his love for you there, encounter his unfailing love so that you too can say in your soul, "I am convinced that nothing shall be able to separate me from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Let us pray.