

Sermon 2008 Pentecost 11

Text: Romans 8:28-39

Theme: "Not the Kind of Conquering we Understand"

Paul was writing to Roman Christians when he wrote these words from our Epistle today. The Roman Gentile Christians were getting pressure from the Roman Jewish Christians to back off and stay in their places. The Christians in general were beginning to be persecuted for being Christian – not because Rome had any problem with multiple religions but the idea that one religion was right and the others were wrong was abhorrent to them. Not only that but the tension between the Jews and the Gentiles was getting irritating and all this talk about Jesus of Nazareth being "the Messiah" was leading to nothing but stress.

So if you were a Roman Christian, particularly a Roman Gentile Christian, life seemed to be pretty stacked against you. I can imagine that you might be thinking, "was this whole conversion thing a good idea?" And into that context Paul says,

"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose," and,

“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” First I think that the Romans who heard this would not have seen the good that God was working and second, I think that they did not feel like conquerors.

There are many times in life when we are supposed to take comfort in the idea that God turns all things for our good and so we are conquerors through him, but the comfort is often fleeting and sometimes feels fake. I think that is because God does not define “good” or “conquer” the way we do. He never has and he never will. As I have said many times before, when we come across incongruence between us and God – guess who’s right? We have to redefine our ideas of “good” and “conquer,” and when we do, life becomes more simple and more joyful. Is anyone in favor of simple and joyful? I know I am!

Good is not fun or pleasure or entertainment. Good is what is best for the whole body of Christ. Fun, pleasure and entertainment can all carry sinful components within them but good never does. Good is what is just and right. Good is what

brings joy to all concerned. Good is full of grace and never guilt or shame and never at the expense of another.

If I suffer from some trial but in my suffering I draw closer to God and the body of Christ, the Church, then that is good. There's nothing like suffering, fear, anxiety and shame to strengthen faith. You've heard the old adage, "there are no atheists in foxholes." Although I guess foxholes may not be a military practice any longer, the idea is that when bombs are going off and shrapnel is flying in every direction, suddenly God becomes very real and very essential.

While I don't enjoy suffering, I do wonder if the decline in Christianity in the USA is due to us being fat and rich. What would happen to the Church if we had a famine? Or a plague? Or an invasion from another country that told us we could no longer worship? I would predict that the number of Christians would shoot through the roof. Suddenly God would become very important for everyone, who before, was too lazy to get out of bed and worship him. Suddenly that sporting event would not seem so necessary that one might miss worshipping the one who

gives you air to breathe. Suddenly giving a faithful offering to the one who holds you by a single thread dangling over the fires of destruction would not seem like such a great sacrifice. I do not advocate for suffering, nor do I enjoy it, but I do recognize that it clarifies our focus and changes our priorities for the better. In the midst of suffering, weak human concepts like pleasure and fun melt away and "good" begins to be grasped.

"Conquer" does not mean beat the stuffing out of somebody. That's what the Romans thought when they heard the word conquer. And that is what we think too. We think of conquer as coming out on top, being the best, the strongest, the richest, being right. But notice that Paul slips in that weird little verse from Psalm 44 right before he calls us conquerors.

Yet for your sake we are killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.

Not only does he make the point that suffering has always gone hand in hand with being God's people but he redefines "conquer" for us. When we proclaim the love and forgiveness of Christ, we are conquerors. And I don't mean standing on a street corner "preachin' Jesus." I mean reaching out to someone who

has offended you and showing love. I mean forgiving your kids over and over and over again no matter how many times they break your rules. I mean refusing blame, shame and guilt and instead rejoicing in Christ's forgiveness for you. I mean using the love of God and not just talking about it.

It is love that truly conquers. Vengeance, force, strength, riches: they are all worldly ideas that seem to conquer, but those are things that might win the battle once in a while but will ultimately always lose the war. Love conquers. Once we have discovered that, we have discovered the treasure in the field, the fine pearl, the good fish. We have discovered the secret to simple joy in life. AMEN.