

8th Sunday after Pentecost
July 30, 2017
Romans 8:26-39
The Rev. Carenda Baker

Oh good! I'm so glad you've gotten here and found your seats just in time. The curtain is about to go up. We've run out of programs already, but here's what the program says. Today's 3 act play is titled: ***"Inseparable Love"***. ACT 1 opens with a single spotlight on a man at center stage, sitting hunched over, head held in one hand, pen in the other. The caption for Act 1: LIFE IS HARD.

It's turning into an awfully long letter he is writing to his Christian brothers and sisters in Rome. He's spelling out what he has seen, heard, and experienced since he became a follower of the Way. Some have taunted him and called him a traitor, a turn coat for Jesus. He had been a prominent member of the Pharisees, a staunch and zealous persecutor of the followers of Jesus. And here he is now a full-blown missionary to Gentiles and a church planter. No wonder people are skeptical and not sure if he can be trusted. He couldn't have dreamed in a million years how meeting Christ unexpectedly on the road to Damascus would literally blind him, turn his life upside down and inside out. Make a completely new man out of him, to be sent off with an altogether different, dangerous and daring calling. He is writing from his own experience of those things that have hindered and threatened to derail his work. These things weigh him down some days. At night, he dreams about these obstacles, and is startled awake with fright, sweating, his heart racing. *Life is hard*, he says to himself. He knows opposition to his message will continue, likely intensify. It's a formidable list, those things that discourage him. *Hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword*. He pauses for a moment to think then writes to his friends: *"The Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought."* These are words of wisdom from a man who is devoted to the Lord, prays every day as often as he can. He needs to. He is a wise man because he recognizes that he doesn't really know how to pray. Sometimes the words won't come. The well is bone dry. On his own he just can't muster clear thoughts. His holy desire gets depleted and he just doesn't know what to say. Overcome at times with physical exhaustion, prayer then is the furthest thing from his mind. And there are always distractions. Even when he sits alone in silence, distractions dance around inside his head. Especially when he sits alone in silence. "Abba, help".

The apostle Paul's letter to the Romans is meant for us. Though our world is much different from 1st century Rome, tough circumstances we face can block our awareness of God's love for us.

HARDSHIP. Every one of us has faced or is facing some sort of hardship. Financial. Emotional and relational problems. Needing to find work and purpose and meaning in life. Physical health changes and increased limitations. Trying to stay clean and in recovery from an addiction.

DISTRESS. Bombarded by thirty-second sound bites and constant images, our nerves get frayed. Anxiety spreads like wildfire. It's in the air we breathe. Constant uncertainty keeps us on edge. Who's in charge here? Truth is a daily moving target. Worries pile up for dear ones near and far. Disappointment, grief and loss hang around like unwanted guests. What can we really control? That's the question.

FAMINE. Whether we see it or not, it's there. Food insecurity is right here in our neighborhood and state, around the nation and world. The breadth of need can feel overwhelming. There is serious poverty – and not only the material kind, but spiritual poverty, too. Dignity, kindness and respect seem to be drying up, in short supply.

NAKEDNESS. Nakedness is exposure, both physical and emotional. We know this vulnerability in ourselves. And we see its presence especially in the most vulnerable ones in our world. There among the homeless, mentally ill, victims of violence and human trafficking. We can try to stay insulated from having to look at the naked vulnerability around us. But what we have yet to learn is that there can be no me in this world without you, and no you without me. "I am what I am because of who we all are." This is the guiding principle called "ubuntu", from the Zulu and Xhosa languages. It means humankind can only make it if all of us make it together. "Ubuntu" was the basis for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, the group chaired by Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, formed after the dismantling of apartheid. The process moved through the rigor of courageously and clearly naming the atrocities, human rights violations, the sins committed. Victims faced their persecutors and told their stories of unthinkable pain and wounding. Some perpetrators present listened. This was the first step toward healing. The hope was that these encounters would pave the way for forgiveness, reparation, restoration, and reconciliation. Tragedy and oppression do call into question the extent of God's love for us.

PERIL. Yes, there is peril to face, much more for some of us than others. Division. Suspicion. Hatred.

WORD. New missiles with nuclear capabilities. Threats made to our country by other nations. Threats by our government directed to other nations. And each and every single day, many people die – expectedly and unexpectedly.
LIFE IS HARD.

So we are called to pray. We need to pray. And yes, we need the Spirit's help because sometimes we just don't know how. Trials can challenge our trust in God's relationship with us. We might find ourselves asking – "Is God really for us? Does God really hear us and care?" It's an act of faith to trust when we can't see, prove, or offer tangible evidence for God's existence. I have found myself at times, much like the little boy saying to his mother as they prepared for bedtime prayers– "But Mama, what I really want is to know God with some skin on."

Precisely because we can't see God, it's easy to neglect turning toward God, neglect our need to nurture that relationship planted in each of us by God from the very beginning. I don't like to admit this, but I have at times charged impatiently headlong into the day, revved up with my full agenda, self-confident, ready to get that "to do list" done. Morning prayer time will often get skipped on those days. Being so willful, determined and driven can be like saying, "I can take care of things on my own today, Lord. I'll call you if I need you."

In wisdom the apostle Paul faces reality. He knows we can't do this on our own. We have to depend on God.

"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. 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." Such a gift! The Spirit does what we cannot do for ourselves, knows how to speak to God's heart for us. O what blessed relief that is.

And so we come now to ACT 2: The heading in the program reads: GOD IS GOOD. Paul writes: *"All things work together for good for those who love God."* One commentator suggests a better translation would be: *"God makes all things work together for good with those who love him."* Paul's focus in this entire passage is on the work of God. Suffering does not get whitewashed as being "good", nor is "good" our reward for loving God. God's plan is and has always been the redeeming of creation. We will be restored into the image of God who called us into being, and in whose image we are meant to live. The work is begun but not yet completed in us. God intends to bring forth goodness, especially working for good mysteriously in the midst of the mess and mayhem within and around us. It can be hard to see the good, even when we are intent on finding it. The parable of the leaven in Matthew's gospel teases us with the notion that something hidden can be at work for good, even when we can't see it. Sounds a lot like God to me. Hidden, not directly seen. Over time, working for good. Creating abundance that nourishes, gives life, and satisfies.

“What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?

. . . It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword. . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For 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.”

Finally we have arrived at our play's last act. The caption for ACT 3: LOVE WINS!

Any time I am present at a funeral and hear these words of Paul read, I am so grateful for his faithful, inspired writing. Paul's words are filled with such strong, confident faith and hope that the God who is love - wins! Always – no matter what. This is enough to buoy our spirits so that we can contend with whatever life is throwing or will throw at us. Love wins because God's very being is love. We need never fear abandonment and separation. God is not merely stuck with us. God is committed to us. Longing for our healing and wholeness. Leading us to liberation. Looking for us to be partners in the holy hard work of sharing with the world signs of the healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation God desires.

Friends, we are the leaven of God's mercy and justice in the world. We will mess up and sin, fail, and fall down tired, and be tempted to give up and quit. But we must, holding onto each other, let God pick us up and strengthen us for the journey ahead. Gratefully and joyfully today, let us receive at the table the mystery Christ's holy life laid down and raised to eternal life for us. Fed with the bread of heaven, fortified with the cup of salvation, we are filled once more and sent forth to play our parts in God's crazy story of “Inseparable Love.” Lots of people don't know it yet, but this one is already destined to be a smash box office hit. Life is hard. God is good. Love wins. And nothing can separate us from God's love.

Amen.