

SERMON TITLE: "Reviewing Romans: More than Conquerors"
SERMON TEXT: Romans 8:26-39
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: August 20, 2023, at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

Most of you know that my family has been going through some challenging times here lately. My husband's cancer diagnosis has been quite a blow to our sense of well-being. We have a lot of medical details and day-to-day care to manage, as well as having to make major life and death decisions. Fortunately, we've felt very well-supported during these past weeks. Thank you so much for all your love, prayers, cards, and offers of help! Besides the well-wishes that have come from you in this congregation, we've also had encouraging messages coming from distant places too.

The first weekend in August was my high school class's reunion in Montana. I had scheduled vacation that week because I originally planned to be there. Our class of 1978 has a Facebook page, and when I wrote on there that I wouldn't be able to attend because of my husband's health problems, so many of my classmates responded with kind words of hope and prayers. The reason I selected Psalm 91 for our Call to Worship today is that a number of my old friends wrote that they would be "praying Psalm 91" for me and Steve. What they meant is that they were praying that we would find refuge and safety in God's care and love.

That idea is also present in Romans 8:26-39. If you worshiped with us last Sunday, you might recall that I'm preaching a series from Paul's letter to the Romans. Many foundational Christian beliefs are found in this epistle. Last Sunday, we covered the earlier verses of chapter eight and reviewed what it's like to climb aboard the Spirit of Life. Today, I invite you to review with me how we people of Christian faith can be more than conquerors.

1—GOD WORKS FOR GOOD

First of all, we can be more than conquerors because God works for good. The Christians at Rome were going through some tough times, and Paul wanted to encourage them and reassure them that everything would be all right. So, in verse 28, the apostle made the important point that, in all things, God works for the good of those who love the Lord and are called according to God's purpose. No matter how bad things might seem right now, we can be confident that God is busy working to make our situation better. God knows the big picture and can see the purposes and plans, the possibilities and outcomes of which we might never even dream. God is able to take something seemingly hopeless and terrible and turn it into something amazing and good.

Many years ago, there was a Vacation Bible School curriculum that included a lesson about what an awesome Creator God is. God started with the chaos of nothing and turned it into stars and planets, water and earth, plants and animals, and even us. A song that went with that lesson asked the question, "Why, oh why, did God make worms?" As the children sang along, they learned that even those slimy creatures that make us squeal and squirm have a very important purpose here on earth: "God gave us worms so we would have good dirt."

So, when things don't happen the way we'd like them to, or when we think we know better than God how things should happen, we should trust that God is looking out for our needs. Instead of moping around feeling sad or angry because bad things happen to good people, we should be inspired by the fact that God has everything under control. Instead of feeling afraid of things we don't understand, we should be encouraged to face the future with boldness. Instead of feeling cheated because life wasn't handed to us on a silver platter, we should keep the faith that there's a rainbow of promise beyond every dark cloud.

Of course, I'm not saying that we should be a Pollyanna and paste a pretend smile on our faces when inside we're crying buckets of tears. Of course, there are appropriate times to be sad and grieve.

God certainly understands our human emotions and our need to express them. But instead of focusing all our attention on worrying and negativity, we should remember that we are more than conquerors because in all things—even the very bad, terrible, awful things—God works for good.

2—GOD IS FOR US

A second point Paul makes here in Romans 8 is that we are more than conquerors because God is for us. We see this in verse 26, where Paul says that the Holy Spirit helps us. When we don't know how to pray or what to pray for, God's Spirit intercedes on our behalf with groans that words can't express. Then, in verse 34, Paul says that Jesus, raised from the dead, is at the right hand of God interceding for us. The righteous one, who would have every justification in the world to condemn us for our sin, is the very one who chooses instead to intervene on our behalf. With the Holy Spirit groaning for us and Jesus pleading for us and God the Father giving his only begotten Son for our sins, what wouldn't God do for us?

God is obviously on our side. God wants to help us. In some theological traditions, Christians have believed that God predestined some people for good and others for evil. They base that belief, in part, on Romans 8:28-33. They think that God has called some people and that those elect are the only ones who will gain God's blessings. As United Methodists, however, we believe that God has chosen and called all people to be God's children. As Paul wrote in verse 29, Jesus was the firstborn son, so that we might all become a part of God's big family. God has predestined all of us with prevenient grace. Before we were ever born, before we ever sinned, before we ever knew we needed God's love and mercy, God was already preparing a way for us. God was already providing physical and spiritual blessings. God was already planning for our salvation.

It's like what the prophet Jeremiah wrote to the Jewish people who had been taken into captivity in Babylon. Obviously, that was a horrific experience. After the destruction of Jerusalem, they were violently torn away from their homeland and force-marched to a foreign land. Their hearts were

grieving deeply. They were angry and sad, and they probably felt hopeless. Yet Jeremiah the prophet wrote God's words to them, saying, "I have plans for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (29:11). No matter how bad our situation might seem, we can be more than conquerors—because no matter who or what might be against us, God is definitely for us.

3—GOD LOVES US

The third point Paul makes in this passage of scripture is that we are more than conquerors because God loves us. In fact, in Romans 8:38-39, Paul says that God loves us so much that nothing—not life or death, not the present or the future, not angels in heaven or rulers on earth, not height or depth or anything else in all creation—can separate us from God's love.

Romans 8:38 and 39 are two verses that I memorized when I was a kid attending Vacation Bible School one year. In the classroom we had a colorful poster with those two verses on it. At the end of the week, the teacher gave me the poster to take home. I put the poster up on the wall in my bedroom, where it stayed for several years and inspired me for life. There are probably no other verses as dear to my heart as these verses from Romans 8, which assure me of God's sustaining, all-sufficient love.

Annie Johnson Flint was a Christian poet who lived in the late 1800s and suffered from debilitating arthritis. In the midst of her suffering and her faith, she wrote these words about God's love for us:

God hath not promised skies always blue,
flower-strewn pathways all our lives through;
God hath not promised sun without rain,
joy without sorrow, peace without pain.
But God hath promised strength for the day,
rest for the labor, light for the way,
grace for the trials, help from above,
unfailing sympathy, undying love.

The pain of Annie Johnson Flint's arthritis might have been powerful enough to keep her in bed, but it wasn't strong enough to separate her from the love of God in Christ Jesus her Lord. Annie Johnson Flint knew that, no matter what happens, we are more than conquerors because God loves us.

CONCLUSION

After meeting with the oncologist on Tuesday, Steve and I also met with a hospice nurse on Friday. Steve wanted to know what all his options are before he embraces one type of treatment over another. For some people, the idea of hospice is really hard. To them, it feels like giving up. But, as the hospice nurse explained to us, choosing hospice can be a comforting, peaceful, and sacred way of spending the final months or maybe even years of life. As Christians, we believe that there is no enemy—not cancer, not chemotherapy side effects, not even death itself—that could separate us from God. Whether we fight for more time on this earth or we fight to have a better quality of life for however long we have left, our victory comes from God who works for good, who is for us, and who loves us. That confidence is what gives us strength to overcome. That strength from God is what makes us more than conquerors.