

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, Epistle, Year A

INSEPARABLE LOVE

Romans 8:26-39

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Paul Jaster

26 Likewise 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. 27 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. 28 We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

31 What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? 32 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? 33 Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. 35 Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 As it is written,

"For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 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.

DIAGNOSIS: Fractured Love

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Wedges, Dividers, Separators

There is a long list of “things” that separate us from love of God and neighbors. At the bottom of the eighth, Paul lists a small sample: hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, weapons of hate and violence, the sobs of grief and sorrow. “In everything God works for good,” Paul says. In EVERYTHING??? Are there no exceptions? How can Paul have the gall to make this brazen claim when we have the headaches and the heartaches to prove the opposite?

One children’s story tells of the spunky orphan girl, Pollyanna, who went to live with her spinster aunt. And although she was treated rudely, Pollyanna cheerfully took comfort in what she called the “good game”—a game that tried to find a good in every bad. Is that what Paul is doing here—playing games with us? Telling us to chin up and look on the bright side, for “things” are not as bad as they may seem?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Uncertain about God

But “things” get worse. If love is the glue that holds us all together, then sin is the wedge that splits us all apart. Suffering hurts. Death is devastating. Parents are often clueless. Children can be rude and unresponsive. The streets are violent. Social snubs sting. A frustrated love wrenches the

heart. God seems to be distant and uninvolved. The problem with suffering is not a problem with suffering, but with God. A God who doesn't seem to be doing God's job. A God who seems to be out to lunch while human arrogance triumphs. We not only have a "love problem" (Step 1) but we also have a "faith problem" (Step 2).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Missing Out

And our "faith problem" can lead to a "hope problem" (Step 3)—namely, missing out on the God who is for us and not against us and on the love of Christ whom God gave up for all of us. And, therefore feeling accused, judged, condemned, and unloved. Let Pollyanna try to find an honest bright side to that!

PROGNOSIS: Inseparable Love

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Jesus—God's Love for Us

Already in the bottom of the eighth, Paul proclaims the solution to our "hope problem." Paul gives us the final score. "If God is for us, who is against us?" God "did not withhold God's own Son, but gave him up for us" to be the firstborn within a large family. There is no question. No doubt about it. Jesus is God's love for us. As Paul said in the top of the eighth, "There is therefore now no condemnation... no condemnation... no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Convinced

Only faith in the faithfulness of God in Christ can make us certain that what is happening in Christ is really happening "for us." And it enables us to say "We know!" We know that in everything God works for good. We know that those whom God foreknew God also predestined to conform to the blueprint of God's Son. We know that those whom God called (elected) God also justified. We know that those whom God justified God glorifies.

And there you have it: the four biggest doctrines of Christianity in their proper place at the beginning of the batting order: Predestination, election, justification and sanctification (glorification). This is God's solution to our "faith problem." It is no "good game," it is God's grace.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Inseparable Love

"If God is for us, who is against us? The one who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" Saint Paul never meant these to be questions. They are "certainties," the "certainties" of the resurrection faith, which give answer to "our love of God and neighbor problem" in times when we no longer are so certain. "All things do work for good for those who love God." No "thing" can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

There may not be a silver lining behind every cloud Pollyanna style. But behind the cross there is a resurrection, behind death is an empty tomb, behind suffering there is a love as strong as death, and behind it all there is a loving God whose grace is bursting at the seams.

By the Holy Spirit, who "helps us in our weakness" and who "intercedes with sighs too deep for words," we are drawn into the grace of God, for by the proclamation of the gospel "we are convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depths, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." "In all these things we are more than conquerors through the God who loved us."

And what could possibly be "more" than that? Being beloved and being made part of God's own family imaged after God's own son.

How is that for a promising future, Pollyanna?