

June 13, 2010
The National Presbyterian Church

The World Watches on Tip Toes

Romans 8

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Today's sermon from the book of Romans in the 8th Chapter is a remarkable chapter; so many great themes converge in this chapter. In Chapters 6, 7 and 8, St. Paul is really answering the question, "What does it mean to be a Christian?" He defines being a Christian with the word freedom, a freedom that God grants but also a freedom we choose. A freedom from sin and death and the power of evil, the power of the devil and a freedom toward life and toward salvation, toward righteousness. This means that the Christian life is a journey, it's a freedom journey from – to. He uses those two prepositions all the way through Chapter 6 and you'll see them again in Chapter 8. A freedom from – a freedom toward.

And then in the 7th Chapter he makes it clear that that journey, that freedom is not only the redemption granted to us but it is the choice we make to leave behind sin and death and the power of evil toward life and that decision is itself made in a stormy place. Paul speaks autobiographically in the 7th Chapter about how hard it was. How did he do it? How is this discipleship lived in the midst of the turbulent line, in the 24 hour cycle where everybody else has to live too? Paul recognizes that a turbulent line flows through him and yet this is what the Christian life is all about. We chose to trust God in just such a real place. How can we do it? Now in the 8th Chapter it becomes really clear. We can do it because God himself enables us to do it. And in fact notice how the 8th Chapter begins. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, for the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus," (Romans 8:1) and in this Chapter we're going to hear more teaching from St. Paul about the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives than almost anywhere else in the New Testament; right here in this chapter. "The Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free." Notice again this freedom, "from the law of sin and death toward life and righteousness." It's the Holy Spirit who sets us free. "For God has done what

the law weakened by the flesh could not do.” We can’t do it by ourselves. “By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh.” So Jesus Christ came alongside us. We heard that in the 5th Chapter of Romans. “Scarcely for a righteous man would someone die, maybe a good man some might dare, but God shows his love for us while we were sinners. Christ died for us” (Romans 5:7-8). And he reconciled us and gave us a new life. And that new life is that freedom, the freedom from, and the freedom toward.

There are three things Paul wants us to know in this 8th Chapter. Three themes come together and he wants us to know them. First of all, he wants us to know that God is the one who enables us to make that choice from and toward to live the Christian life. It is God and he does it through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Now listen to the way he puts it. All three persons of the Holy Trinity are mentioned in this one paragraph starting with Verse 9.

You’re not in the flesh; you’re in the Spirit since the Spirit of God, [now he mentions the Spirit of God,] dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ, [Now he calls the Holy Spirit the Spirit of Christ] does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, [now there again mixed together. If you know Jesus Christ it’s the Holy Spirit who assures you of Christ. So if you have Christ in you, you have the Spirit, that is the Holy Spirit’s ministry to assure you of Christ.] So if Christ is in you, though your body is dead because of sin the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies here and now. [In the midst of this turbulent line,] he will give life to you through his Spirit who dwells in you” (Romans 8:9-11).

So in that one paragraph we have the Father, Son and Holy Spirit all mentioned together as the way God assures us, the way he enables us. And then an even more moving passage, “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption. And when we cry ‘Abba! Father!’” (By the way, our Lord also used that Aramaic word *Abba*, which is the informal word for father. It would be like the affectionate word for father we would use when we say “Daddy.” Our Lord encouraged us to use that word to refer to our Heavenly Father. So Paul now picks up that word.) “When we cry ‘Abba!’ (the affectionate word for father, “daddy,” father,) “it is the very Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God. And if children then heirs - heirs of God, joint heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:14-17). This is a marvelous assurance that Paul wants us to know about in the 8th Chapter. He wants us to know that God enables each of us to live this Christian life and he does it in us by the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Think of what that ministry is.

First, the ministry of the Holy Spirit points us to our sins. We saw that in the early chapters of Romans when we realize that there's none righteous, no not one. It was the Holy Spirit who points us to Jesus Christ. It is the Holy Spirit who assures us that Jesus Christ dwells in our hearts by faith. I've often quoted that wonderful line from Karl Barth that the ministry of the Holy Spirit can be summed up this way, "When I'm assured that God's love is not just a general truth, it's not just a grand and eternal fact, but it is also for me, that Christ's sacrifice on the cross is also for me,"¹ Karl Barth describes the assurance of the Holy Spirit in that way. That is the ministry of the Holy Spirit in your life and Paul in Romans 8 wants that you know it as a certainty. That's the assurance then of who you are in God's sight.

But even more, the Holy Spirit helps us even to pray. Notice this great line. *Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not even know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And the God who searches our hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit. The Spirit intercedes for the saints,* [now he uses a plural, not just for me individually but for the saints, for brothers and sisters around me] *according to the will of God* (Romans 8:26-27).

This is the ministry of the Holy Spirit and Paul wants us to know and experience that living truth. But there's something else he wants us to know as well. He wants us to know how we fit in with existence itself, the whole created order. And he decides to take that on in this 8th Chapter. Listen to this; it's an amazing paragraph. Paul says, "I consider the suffering of this present time," remember the turbulent line that we've seen throughout the book of Romans, "are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. "For the creation," he's referring now to the entire created order. That would mean mountains, seas, the animal kingdom, human beings, all of life, everything, the whole created order. For he says, "For the whole creation waits with eager longings for the revealing, the coming into view, of the children of God" (Romans 8:18-21). Somehow we're to play an important role now. In fact, J. B. Phillips when he translated this passage says, "The whole created order is standing on tiptoes waiting for the children of God to come into view."² Think about that for a minute. We are going to play a role with regard to all of creation. Listen to Paul now. "The whole creation waits in eager longing for the revealing, the coming into view, of the children of God. For the creation was subjected to" (Romans 8:19), now the new RSNV uses the word *futility* here. It's really the Greek word for boundaries, transitoriness. The whole created order was subjected to boundaries, to a boundary. We know that from Genesis 1. We already saw that in Genesis chapter 1 that in that epic account of creation in six days, and the sixth day is the day that has an ending, that's where we're created too, in the same day as the animals are created: in the sixth day, and that day has an ending; and God called creation on that day very good. The seventh day of the epic

creation account belongs to God, the day without an ending. There's no ending to the seventh day. That's the eternal day. And it's interesting that the first sin of Adam and Eve was motivated by their desire not to be in the sixth day, but to be in the seventh day, to cross over and become God themselves. That was the temptation of the devil. "Did God say, no, no God is tricking you? If you eat of this tree you'll be like God yourself" (Genesis 3:4-5). You'll be in the seventh day. And so the first sin has its source in our apprehension about where we were created and where we fit in the created order, added to our desire to be like God ourselves.

Now with that in mind, listen to St. Paul. He says that the whole created order was subjected to boundaries, to a boundary, not of its own will. How well we know that, that's the first sin. We didn't want to be boundaried. That is the human sin; we wanted to be at epicenter, not to live from the center. We don't want boundaries. We know the Egyptians wanted that too, that's why they built pyramids. And they put ships inside the pyramids that were intended to carry a Pharaoh on to eternity, but we know they didn't. We know that grave robbers unloaded those ships, they didn't leave the pyramids. But that's what they built them for, because we, not of our own will, are boundaried. Nobody really wants to be boundaried. And so the text is very clear, Paul tells us that the whole created order was subjected to boundaries not of its own will, but of the will of him, now he's referring to God, who subjected it in, hold your breath for a minute, you expect him to say "in judgment." You expect that boundary to be the boundary of God's judgment upon your desires. He surprises you. No, "we were subjected to boundaries in hope." *Hope*. Paul surprises us. I thought we were boundaried because God doesn't intend for us to enter into the eternal day. He wants to keep us out of the eternal day. He wants to keep us out of his territory. And so now he judges us. No, Paul has a whole new wonderful Gospel truth to share with us now. "The whole created order was submitted or subjected to boundaries *in hope* because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay," see there's the boundary, "and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:20-21), of which we have a firstfruits as we will see in just a minute.

We've had the first hint of it. This is Paul's view of the whole created order. It's the same view that is affirmed in the book of Revelation. By the way, this very good text clears the air. There are some prophetic movements that talk about the end of the world with incineration language as if that is the whole future of the Earth, to be all burned up. That's not true. That's not the Biblical teaching. The book of Revelation is clear, and now Paul is clear in Romans 8. Do you know what the future of the whole created order is? To be fulfilled. The whole created order is to be fulfilled. Fulfilled, that's including, Washington D.C., Antarctica too. The oceans, that includes the Gulf Coast. That's why it's so important that we care for the Earth. Because

we are going to be fulfilled. We have a fulfillment destiny, that's the future. Remember when we read the final chapter in the book of Revelation we as the *ethna* bring ourselves to the Lamb in the New Jerusalem, that means the people of the earth are not blurred; we don't become gray in eternity. We stay with our identity in eternity, even our ethnic identity is fulfilled.

That's why we don't believe in the immortality of the vaporous soul as in Greek mythology but we believe in the resurrection of the body, concrete you and I are beloved by God. And we're to be fulfilled. The *ethna*, the individual ethnic people bring their gifts to the Lamb; and the tree is next to the Lamb in the center of the garden for the healing of the nations. We're going to be together with God's Son. Everything is going to be fulfilled. Think of how exciting that is when you hold Paul's view in terms of your life here and now. It means that nothing is going to be lost. I used to make a joke about this because of this doctrine, if you're 80 years old why not take up a brand new instrument? Someone says I can't take up the saxophone now, I'm too old. Why? You could play it on into eternity. Start practicing it now. You don't have to stop. You don't have to slow down. You don't have to say, "Oh, I'm about to be closed down." In the very deepest sense we are not going to be closed down. Everything is going to be opened up. God is going to fulfill all of life. He's going to fulfill this world. He's going to fulfill everything. That's the vision of both St. Paul here in Romans, St. Peter in 1 Peter and St. John in the last book in the Bible. It's not going to be burned up; it's going to be fulfilled. And Paul makes that very, very clear.

He even goes on to say that the whole created order is standing on tiptoes waiting for that to happen. It yearns for that. And we ourselves mysteriously are the clue to it. "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now and not only the creation but we ourselves. We have the first fruits of the Spirit." What he means is that when we experience salvation from Christ, when we experience reconciliation in the new life, that was the first sign of our salvation then that event becomes the first clue of what's going to happen for everything. That's called the first fruits. We have the first fruits of this resolving healing and joyous recovery of creation itself. "We've grown inwardly while we wait for this adoption, and the redemption of our bodies, our bodies set free, our bodies redeemed" (Romans 8:22-23).

Notice Paul didn't say our "souls." He doesn't say your "spirit." It is your body, concrete you, loved by God. "For in hope we were saved, and now hope that is not seen is not hope, in other words we don't see it now but we wait for it with patience" (Romans 8:24-25). This is Paul's tremendous vision of the future. And it's an exciting vision that he wants us to all know about. Then he goes on and makes one more point with one more paragraph that some people have been confused about but I hope that that paragraph also will be clear when we look at it now.

Paul says, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God." He is not saying that everything is good. Everything is not good. There's a lot that's happening in Paul's century when he writes this that's pure evil, and he knows it. The gladiator games are under way right now when Paul writes this. People are being thrown to the lions right now when Paul writes this. He knows that things are not all good. There are many bad things. But he does make an amazing point. He says, we know that God works in the midst of all things for good. God is not disarmed by evil. He has a strategy in the midst of evil and it is a mystery strategy that we are a part of too. "So we know that all things work for good to those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). This purpose, this is the same word as the word for destiny, this is the destiny that God has in mind.

For those who he foreknew, and now he uses the word *prognosko* now. Those who he knew ahead of time. God knew us before he made us. "Those who he foreknew, he predestined," there's the great word predestination. It's used here and one other place, this destiny word has caused a lot of trouble for some people because some people think it means fatalism. It's not fatalism and it's not used that way here at all. It's just saying that God who has a purpose for your life, and that is to fulfill the whole of creation, he knew you ahead of time, thank God for that, and he decided ahead of time something about you.

Now listen to what God decided ahead of time for you and me. "That you should be conformed to the image, (that means the character) of His son Jesus Christ in order that Jesus Christ might be the first born among many brothers and sisters" (Romans 8:29). The NRSV translates brothers and sisters with the word "a large family." This is the predestination. Don't become involved in speculations about what predestined means because careless interpretation have been proposed for sure. Here's the predestination text. God made a decision about us that we should be conformed to the image of Christ, that we should discover Christ's love, Chapter 5 of Romans, in order that many people would experience that love too. This is a missionary passage, it is a missional text. So God predecided that we discover God's love so that that love of Christ would be known by many people. This is not a text about some chosen and others not chosen. It's a text about our being chosen in order that many may be chosen and who will by God's grace and will discover God's love.

Well, these are two things Paul wants us to know in Romans 8. He wants us to know that God helps us, he wants us to know also that we have a role to play in the whole fulfillment of the created order itself. And think of how that does upgrade everything you do right now; how it upgrades caring for pelicans, how it upgrades caring for whales, how it upgrades caring for the

lives of young people, investing in the life of a young person, investing in things that count. It means that our investment in doing God's will goes on into eternity. Think of what it means about your own craft and your own trade and what you're good at. Taking up a new instrument when you're in your 70s – why not? Taking up a new interest in your life and starting to work with children when you're 80 years old – why not? You can continue it on into eternity. You who are researchers continue to keep your notes on your research right up to the last day knowing you can continue your research on into eternity.

Everything is fulfilled. It's this marvelous way of looking at life – it means putting more emphasis and more significance to what you're doing now. It's not 'pie-in-the-sky, by-and-by.' We don't live for the future, we live from it knowing that it's all going to be fulfilled; it gives more importance to what we do here and now. And Paul has one more thing he wants us to know. And that's the final paragraph of Romans 8. He wants us to know that this decision that God has made is unshakable. It's unshakable. In fact, he starts the final paragraph, we're going to look at this in detail next week because he repeats this unshakable confidence at the end of the 11th Chapter as he does now at the end of the 8th.

Think how he begins the final paragraph of the 8th Chapter. "If God is for us who can be against us?" And everybody that read this book when Paul wrote it knows that an awful lot of things are against us. One of the most dangerous emperors in the whole history of the first century is Nero who is the emperor of the Roman Empire, and the dangers are horrific. Paul is a contemporary of Nero, who was emperor from 54 A.D. all the way to 68 A.D., and Paul lived in that very period. This is a terrifying time in the Roman Empire. If God is for us who can be against us, we can think of many that are against us. But God's decision is nevertheless unshakable. Think of the way that song ends, "Neither height nor depth nor angels nor principalities nor things present nor things to come, nothing can separate us from the decision God made to love us." That's how Romans 8 ends.

By the way the song we are singing today in just a few moments is "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God". Have you ever thought of what that text is saying? Did you know that Martin Luther had two texts for "A Mighty Fortress"? One was Psalm 46: "God is our refuge, our fortress," and the second text for it was Romans 8, this very passage. Romans 8 is the New Testament text for Martin Luther's "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God". Think of the words. It's "a bulwark never failing". "He our helper amid the flood". Remember we saw the flood in Chapter 7. "Of mortal ills prevailing." Paul said, I want to do it, I can't do it. "And then still our ancient foe", and we've met the ancient foe, the one who is against us, the devil, the evil one. "He thinks to work us woe." If God is for us who is against us? We can think of

what's against us. But "his craft, his power is great. He's armed with cruel hate. On Earth doesn't seem to be his equal." It's a good thing we don't end "A Mighty Fortress" with verse one: "Did we in our own strength confide our striving would be losing". Paul already said that in Chapter 7. "Were not the right man on our side, the man of God's own choosing." That's Romans 8. "Now you ask who it is, I'll tell you his name"; Paul says it as does Martin Luther. "Christ Jesus is his name. Lord *Sabbeoth*." That means the Shepherd who doesn't lose his sheep. He's the Lord who doesn't lose his sheep. Lord Sabbeoth his name. "From age to age he is the same, and he will win the battle." That's Romans 8. "And though this world is with devils filled", that's again, if God is for us who can be against us? "Should threaten to undo us"; by the way, in that song of Romans 8 it says we are like sheep being slaughtered sometimes. "We will not fear, for God has willed his truth will triumph through us". The prince of darkness is grim Luther says, but we don't tremble for him. "His rage we can endure". Notice how defiant Luther is in that part of the song. Did you know the tune that the Reformers put this text to was a bar room tune from Munich taverns? And how right because this Martin Luther text needs a really rousing tune. "For lo, his doom is sure, one little word will fell him". And "that word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth; the Spirit and the gifts are ours (Romans 8) through him who with us sideth". "Let goods and kindred go and this mortal life also". You know, 100 percent of us die. Nothing can change the percentage.³ That's a C. S. Lewis quote. That's the boundary, but yet there's hope because Jesus Christ is Lord of the boundary. "This mortal life also, the body may be killed but God's truth abideth still and his kingdom is forever." Amen.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this text. Thank you for St. Paul's 8th Chapter, that he wants us to know these three things: that you help us; that you have a role for each of us to play even in the destiny of history itself; and best of all, that nothing can change your decision to love us. In Jesus' name we thank you for that. Amen.

1 Barth, Karl. *Dogmatics in Outline*. Harper Perennial, 1959.

2 Phillips, J.B. *New Testament in Modern English*. Touchstone, 1996

3 Lewis, C.S. *The Weight of Glory*. Eerdmans Publishing, 1965.

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Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

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