

Pentecost 7 7/27/14
Romans 8:28-39 12A

FOR I AM SURE 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.

And take they our life,
Goods, fame, child, and wife,
Though these all be gone,
Our vict'ry has been won;
The Kingdom ours remaineth [LSB 656:4],

we sing in the battle hymn of the Reformation. But, “take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife,” and ... *and* ... our first instinct is to naval gauze, feel sorry for ourselves, moan and groan, and cry, “Where is God?”

Our first instinct, in the darkness of the valley of the shadow of deaths is to see God as uncaring, cold and callous to the scraps and scratches, tears and toils in our lives. You doubt that God really knows or cares that you even exist. You doubt that God works good in all things. You doubt that God has the power to protect you from spiritual and physical enemies. You may even doubt if God really has a place in heaven for you.

Yes, Dear Friends in Christ, in the weakness of our sinful nature, listening to the lies of the devil, doubt causes a struggle in the heart of every Christian. The devil can cause our doubts to drive a wedge between God and us. He can use doubts to make us feel helpless or to convince us that God's power is unable to win victories in our lives. Doubt leaves us feeling alone and isolated, separated from God and His love.

In our Epistle for today, Paul gives us the great hymn of victory. In the face of all doubt, we can say with the saints of God throughout all generations,

For I am sure 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.

In our lesson, Paul refers to numerous trials that may not be familiar to us because we live in a different time than the early Christian who first read these words. When Paul writes, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?” he is listing the various trials faced by the early Christians.

Each of the seven words describes the plight of one who confesses Jesus Christ. Hail, health, and heartache all remind us that we face tribulations and hardships. Yes, we live in the shadow of the valley of death, but to the Christians Paul first wrote these words to, they also had to contend with the Roman government. At the time Paul wrote these words, Christianity was an illegal religion. Times on this earth can be hard. But, especially with the kind of pressure the first century Christians lived under could easily cause doubt.

“Tribulation” is something that we all know too well. Daily, we live a world which wants to squeeze us into its mold. The world wants us to live by its standards and conduct and morality that are incompatible with God’s will. This trouble is followed by “hardship,” that could leave the Christians of the first century in “famine” and “nakedness”. Remember, Christianity was an illegal religion. Christians could not own property. It was not uncommon that the Roman government would confiscate the property of a Christian and literally throw you out on the street, to live in famine and nakedness.

If that were not bad enough, the Roman government did not hesitate to kill Christians for their faith in Christ. The “sword” literally refers to the “killing sword” that a Roman soldier would use to kill a saint of God.

In our land today, we may not face nakedness or famine or death for confessing Christ, but that roaring lion Satan will come to devour us. Indifference to hearing and learning God’s Word, spiritual apathy, and misplaced priorities can just as easily afflict us and separate us from God’s love in Christ. In a land of plenty, we may not have less, but we feel cheated if we don’t have more. We can lose confidence whether we are in the midst of the good life or in the midst of persecution.

So it is that we often find the pieces of our lives in shambles. We try our best, using all the self-help, do-it-yourself advice of Dr. Phil, but, we only end up in frustration.

Martin Luther was for a time in gloomy spirits. In vain did Katie, his beloved wife, try to cheer him. At last she put on a black widow’s garment and went around the house in deepest mourning. When Luther observed this, he asked, “Who is dead?” “God,” replied Katie. The great Reformer was shocked. “Don’t talk so foolish!” he replied. “Well, my dear Doctor,” answered Katie, “you are so downhearted that I concluded God must be dead, and so I put on my mourning apparel.” Luther understood the lesson his good wife wished to teach him, embraced her, and forgot his cares.

God is not dead, My Redeemed in Christ, and we are His beloved children. We have victory in the midst of personal defeat. We have strength in our times of weakness. It’s all ours from a loving Father, who makes us “more than conquerors” through Jesus Christ our Lord.

In our times of trial or doubt, our strength will be in the power of God. With the eyes of faith, we too can see through the trial to the triumph.

We follow the example not only of the early Christians and apostles but also of our Lord Jesus Himself. “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God,” the Bible says (He 12). He endured the trial and agony of the cross. He too was confronted with Satan’s attempts to make Him doubt the power of God. He too overcame the temptation to doubt God with the assurance of God’s Word.

In His death on the cross of Calvary, the innocent Son of God suffered the ultimate anguish of total separation from God, as He endured God’s just punishment on a sinful world. He cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Luther calls this the strongest confession of faith in all the Scriptures. In the midst of His suffering and dying woes, Jesus did not doubt God; He knew that God’s will was being done.

Jesus’ trust and hope in God was not in vain. Yes, Jesus endured the punishment for our sin and died the death of our sin so that we would have the forgiveness of our sins. But, on the third day, the bonds of the tomb were burst, and Jesus came from forth in His glorified Body to proclaim God’s victory over death. That’s the victory in which we share. By virtue of our Baptism into Christ, we have been united with Him in His death and resurrection. What a blessing is ours! We who put our trust in the merits of Jesus Christ have died with Him to sin and will one day ascend into the glory of heaven.

We have the greatest of treasures; that one pearl of great value in Jesus. We have heaven, where we will be with Jesus and He will wipe all the tears from our eyes.

With that assurance, we face trials with Him in hope. With that assurance, we overcome our doubts with faith. We can sing the hymn of confidence with the apostle and saints of ever age:

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.”

Jesus has defeated our greatest enemy, death itself, and we reign with Him over all, even over the grave. Paul assures us that every power, every enemy, literally everything, is under subjection to Christ and therefore is unable to separate us from our Beautiful Savior.

Yes, we have our moments of doubt. Especially in the midst of personal trial and suffering, we can be vulnerable prey to Satan’s wiles. But the promise of God to those who stand on the Rock of Christ is that nothing in all of creation is to be feared. To be in Christ is to share in His victory. Doubt is overcome by faith.

Through Word and Sacrament, God builds us up and strengthens our faith, so that we may ever fear, love, and trust in Him above all things.

As we journey through this vale of tears, we need not doubt in the midst of crosses and trials, because “in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.” Amen.