

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

July 26, 2020

Psalm 125:1–5

- 1** Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be moved, but abides forever.
- 2** As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the LORD surrounds his people,
from this time forth and forevermore.
- 3** For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest
on the land allotted to the righteous,
lest the righteous stretch out
their hands to do wrong.
- 4** Do good, O LORD, to those who are good,
and to those who are upright in their hearts!
- 5** But those who turn aside to their crooked ways
the LORD will lead away with evildoers!
Peace be upon Israel!

OLD Testament Reading: Deuteronomy 7:6–9

6 “For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. **7** It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, **8** but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. **9** Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations,

EPISTLE: Romans 8:28–39

28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those 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 among many

brothers. **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.

God's Everlasting Love

31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? **32** He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? **33** Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. **34** Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. **35** Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? **36** As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded 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 sure 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.

THE HOLY GOSPEL: Matthew 13:44–52

The Parable of the Hidden Treasure

44 “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

The Parable of the Pearl of Great Value

45 “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, **46** who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

The Parable of the Net

47 “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. **48** When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. **49** So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous **50** and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

New and Old Treasures

51 “Have you understood all these things?” They said to him, “Yes.” **52** And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

Sermon 29 – Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

“Destiny Awaits”

Romans 8:28-39

Dear friends,

The question of free will is a difficult one. How much of the choices I make are my choices? How much are they pre-determined based on my preferences, my history, my life choices? How much of what I do has been pre-arranged by my society, my philosophy, and so on? The Christian adds another puzzling element on top of these: How much of what I do is God, and how much of what I do is me? Paul answers these questions by not answering them completely, which is a very Bible thing to do. It's big, deep stuff, but we shouldn't shy away from it when the Scriptures speak on it, which they do here. In this section of Romans Paul uses these questions as an offhand, which for many might be unhelpful, because this can be a central worry. But the manner in which Paul deals with it is just as important as what Paul says about it, and this is often the case. So what is Paul saying? He's not giving some great treatise on determinism, predestination, or what have you. He is instead making reference to what God does in eternity to help you understand what God is doing right now in your world.

We have touched on Romans often in the past weeks, so I'll skip most of the preamble. This chapter is all about the consequences of the Christian faith, and the reassurance of how those consequences play out. Paul has talked about how the faith has transformed the day-to-day of his life, making every day a struggle with his sins, but also a reminder of the hope that he has in that struggle. He then starts talking about how this wrestling with sin yields hope, and in so doing talks about what God has done.

“28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” This is a wonderful, comforting passage, but only becomes more so when you remember what Paul has just said. The chapter has been all about the painfulness of the struggle with sin, in the world and in yourself. Paul tells you that the frustration you feel with your own self, the anger you feel at what goes on in the world, is all a part of this. That these frustrations, this anger, is all working together for your good. That your failures, your sins, the destruction that those sins cause, the plague, the civil strife, the tearing down of established things, all that works for the good of God's church.

That is not just a challenge to see, it is also incomprehensible when you think about it. Sin is evil, God tells us this unflinchingly. Paul tells us it with brutal harshness in this very letter, in the early chapters. Sin is evil, never doubt it. But, as I have told you before, the true essence of God's genius is that He makes evil produce good while still calling it evil. He makes evil work for His good purposes, yet still condemns it, still punishes it. I don't know how that works, but that is His promise. You see this in the crucifixion. The crucifixion is an act of framing and murder, yet by this deceit, by this violence, God makes salvation. Does God hate your sins? Yes, He does,

without question. Does God hate the way that our sins wreak havoc on the world? You bet He does. Yet God uses His enemies, God uses those things that He hates, to accomplish good purposes and good things. Thanks be to God that He does. He doesn't respond with righteous wrath, He responds with kindness and hard work to make us, the ones who make those sins, holy. To justify our unholiness, make up for it, and make us something different.

I want you to remember this, because this is the reason why Paul says what he says next. **“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 among many brothers. 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.”** God sees all this. God sees all possible futures, all possible outcomes to all situations. We call this omniscience, knowledge of all, right? What this means is that God is presently manipulating every possible outcome to work out for the purpose of His plan. God is in control of everything that happens, and more to the point God is in control of everything that *might* happen. We often talk about this, but we don't often talk about why. God is in control of everything in order to save you, in order to strengthen your faith, in order to bring about those good things. Not just for you, but for the church, and in the world. Bringing people to faith, bringing about holiness and righteousness in human souls in this world, is God's top priority, and He pulls all the strings in every different timeline to make that happen.

You all know the truth that hard times and difficulties strengthen you. Many of you probably have long experience with this. Why? Because God specifically controlled events to make that come about. Same for your sins. Your struggle with your sins not only honors God, it benefits your neighbor. Doing sins doesn't, again, they're still sins, but God takes that evil and makes good come out of it. Letting this world tear itself apart, gripping it in the fingers of a plague, these things hardly seem like they will produce good. They are producing chaos, war, death, and pervasive sense of despair. But God brings life out of death, He brings peace out of war, He brings order, true order, an order of love, mercy, and peace. Good from evil. The chain ends with glory, as Paul establishes it. God works ultimately for that glory. At the beginning of time, He set His sights on you, each and every one of you. It doesn't matter who you are or what you've done, at the beginning of time, God saw you, He knew you, and He made it His mission to make you holy. Everything around you is God's instrument to make that happen.

“31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? 33 Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn?” What these words mean, very simply, is that nothing can threaten you. That seems impossibly ridiculous to say, we are surrounded by chaos and death. Yet God challenges you to believe that these things, since they are in His hands, will benefit you. If you find that challenge utterly insurmountable, you're not alone. I don't believe it either. I see threats everywhere. I could get hurt, I could die, worse, I could continue to live like this. But God responds to that fear with the words that I just said. Who can be against us if God is for us? If

they try, they will fail. Yes, we may be hurt, yes, we will die, yes, God forbid we will continue to live in a disgustingly average mediocrity, but we belong to God. Since we belong to God, all pain will work for us, not against us. But it will still be pain, God, it will still harm us. Through that harm, strength will be gained, wisdom will be gleaned, and ultimately, God will use it to benefit us and His church. We could be hurt, killed, and die. Sure. But death is nothing to God's children, because death is nothing but the gateway to eternal life. It doesn't hold us any more than it holds Jesus.

It is a question of focus and control. We like control, but Paul reminds that God's supreme control is something He doesn't let us usurp. That is to say, God has the steering wheel, and we are constantly trying to yank it away, and when we do all we end up doing is veering off course. You will probably continue to do this, as I will, but when you feel that temptation remember these words. If God is for us, no one can stand against God. If that's so, Jesus is here to make sure that all this makes sense and means something. The difficulty is trusting that the result is good for us. But that trust doesn't come in a void. It comes knowing what Paul said first. Jesus saw all this. He planned for every outcome, every contingency. Jesus orchestrated everything to reveal Himself and His love to you. To bless you through your curses, your troubles, your hurts. To guide you with those same things to His glory in the world to come.

Amen