

What Shall We Say?

Romans 8:31-39

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Sunday, July 27, 2008

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

There are things that happen to us that just make us want to say something...anything. For me, that often happens when I'm driving...when the guy just in front of me...in the far right lane, makes a left turn...on red! Words can't come out of my mouth fast enough, and they weren't clergy words. This is not a good thing. Then there are times when things happen and we don't know what to say. Those are often the extreme times in our lives, like 9/11, when all we could do was look at one another and weep...when loss entered our lives suddenly...or when a child was born healthy and whole...when we realized that the person we loved most in the whole world loved us back. There are times when we need to speak and at the same time cannot speak. The Apostle Paul has just arrived at that moment and asks, "What are we to say about these things?" Let us pray:

We ask, O Lord, that as we think about what you have done for us in Jesus Christ, we will see clearly your love and its work in our lives. By the power of your Holy Spirit, may each of us hear the word from your Word that will strengthen us for the days ahead, days that will be filled by your unconquerable love. Amen.

What are we to say about these things? Well, it would be good to know what 'these things' are, wouldn't it? We are end the end of the eighth chapter of Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome and 'these things' refers to everything that has already been said in those chapters – chapters which deal with the reality of the human condition and how that human condition can be salvaged. You know, it took the British preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones 13 years to preach on the 16 chapters of Romans. I'm guessing it took him 9 ½ years to get through those first eight chapters. Settle in.

Paul tells us that it doesn't matter who we are – we could be among the covenant people who were given the Law and the Prophets, or we could be among the Gentiles who are ignorant of all those things. It doesn't matter – there are no righteous people. There are no privileged people. There are only sinful people who stand before God guilty of rebelling against Him. They (we) have all fallen and we can't get up. The only difference between the two groups is that the group with the Law knows why they are guilty. Those in the group without the Law may not recognize their guilt, but they know something's wrong. And everyone is powerless to do anything about it.

It reminds me of a B.C. comic strip I saw a few weeks ago. The brontosaurus starts the day by swallowing a bug. He is then trampled by a bunch of fellow brontosauri. Then, as he is being chased by some unseen carnivore, he trips on a rock and falls into a tar pit. In the last panel, covered with tar (and you know he's on his way back to the pit) he approaches the rock. This time it's the 'Game Warden' rock. He says, "I'd like to apply to be put on the endangered species list."

The brontosaurus' condition is our condition. We are mired in the tar pits of sin and death – we ourselves are on the endangered species list and we cannot extricate ourselves. The Law that says "Don't go into the tar pit" won't help us get out of it. What's worse, sin and death are not only around us, they are in us. Our rebellion against God has condemned us to experience the life we said we wanted – a life free from God. We declared our independence and we got it. We walked away from God and abandoned any hope of living into all the good and even the glory – the dignity and purpose – that God had prepared for us. So, as Paul lays out this wretched diagnosis, he asks a question (he does that a lot in this letter). He asks, "What are we to do? Who deliver us from this body of sin and death?"

He has zeroed in on the place where the world and all that is in it reaches its lowest point, where its pride, vanity and despair are not only unmistakable, they are inevitable, where the groanings are most bitter and where God cannot be seen – and in that place of all places, Paul tells us, is where we will encounter Jesus

Christ. He stands there, assuming all our guilt and bears the judgment of God on our behalf. And he is there not by accident or for any reasons of martyrdom or by any arbitrary whim of God his Father. He is there in our place...on our behalf...because he is for us. What should provoke his anger only activates his love.

It is from that place where God's love and our sin meet – right there on the cross – that we are taken off the endangered species list. Katherine Grieb, a professor at Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria has said that because of what Christ did on the cross, sin and death have been served eviction notices. They can no longer occupy the space that belongs to us. And that is where the transformation of all things begins.

When we see and comprehend this, we are neither able to speak nor to keep silent and it is at this point that we ask, "What shall we say?" Paul knows we have to say something – well, at least he needs to say something. He pounds the point home. You'd think knowing the salvation of Christ would be enough, but Paul has encountered enough in his ministry to know that we will get it wrong. So, he begins a series of persuasive questions that build one upon the other. In fact, he answers questions with questions with questions.

First: If God is for us, who will be against us? Well, if we look at our lives, we are tempted to think that someone somewhere is against us. The world certainly doesn't seem to be inclined to encourage us or to affirm unconditionally that we have great value. On the contrary, we are judged everyday. Growing up among Southerners, I knew a huge judgment was coming down on someone whenever the conversation started with "Bless her heart..."

As we go through a world that ignores us at best and tries to destroy us at worst, Paul want us to know that God is for us. The question at this point is not, "Are we on God's side?" If I spend my time asking that question, then I will go down a path of introspection where everything I encounter is me." It is a never-ending road with no answer along the way.

No, the question is whether God is on our side. The answer is YES! But we need to be careful when we talk about God being on our side. I am finally coming to the conclusion of Thucydides Complete History of the Peloponnesian Wars. I know, it's a geeky thing to do, but.... Anyway, page after page is about the Athenians or the Spartans lining up cities to be 'on their side.' The conditions of all the alliances are specific and are only entered into when the parties think they will benefit. And, let me say this...they have about as much sticking power as a Post-It note. God is not on our side in this way.

He is not a subservient ally we mobilize so that we can get what we want. He is on our side because he entered our human existence and rescued us – without condition. He has claimed us for himself and he will not let us go. He has been this way – for us – before the foundation of the world.

Paul then goes on to remind us that if God gave Jesus in order to rescue us from the penalty of sin and death, won't he then give us everything we need in order become the people he meant us to be – people who will, in the end look like Jesus? Jesus doesn't pull us out of the pit and then say, "Okay, buddy, you're on your own and if I were you, I'd steer clear of any black gooey junk." He gives us everything we need to be restored. Being saved is one thing. Being restored is another. You can save an antique car from the junkyard, but the real joy is restoring it to its original glory. And that's what God gives in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

So if God makes things right for us, who will bring charges against us? Who will condemn us if Christ has set us free? In fact, Christ not only has set us free, he continually advocates on our behalf. With all that working for us, with God on our side, how in the world could we ever be separated from the love of God in Christ Jesus? The immediate rhetorical answer should be "We can't be."

But Paul lists the things might seem to be able to put a barrier between us and the love of God. It's as if Paul has a map of our lives that shows where we are and where our destination, our home, is. On that map, just like AAA does with its trip-tiks, Paul points out things might impede us. But he assures that whatever we encounter on our way, it will not keep us from getting home. What are some of those things?

Hardships or persecutions: hardships are never noble things. Oh, they seem noble when we read the histories of those who have overcome them. We cheer when the hardships get beaten back. But when you are in the middle of hardship, it is troubling, annoying, exhausting. Not noble, not by a long shot.

Distress: this is how you feel in the midst of hardship or persecution. Voices whisper constantly in your ear, "God's love is a lie. If he really loved you, you wouldn't be going through this." That's distressing because it puts the whole foundation of your faith and life in jeopardy.

The list goes on and it gets worse as Paul describes things that range from difficult to death dealing. In all of this, he reminds us that nothing will separate us from the love of God.

We need to be very clear – these things will often make us feel like we don't love God. They may cause us to be angry with God. They may come between us and our devotional affection for God. But our anger and our coldness will not affect God's love for us. If you have survived a fight with a spouse or best friend, you understand this.

As Paul goes down the list of things we will encounter, he makes a startling claim when he quotes Psalm 44: For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered. What he is telling us (because he assumes the reader will know what the whole Psalm says) is that all those hardships and perils are not the products of random chance. They are a direct result of the fact that you belong to God and are faithful to him.. When you belong to God, you declare to the world that "Jesus is Lord." That's a dangerous thing to do in a world filled with as many lords as there are people. The fact that your lord is the Triune God threatens all other pretenders to the throne.

And here's an even more startling claim. We are more than conquerors – hypernike – more than champions. This is the same root as the brand Nike, which means win. The last part of my name Eunice...also means Nike. We will not only endure these things. These circumstances will actually work in our favor to bring us back to the life God had for us all along. It is God's great jiu-jitsu move.

It is so true that Paul is convinced that it is true. He doesn't feel or imagine or wish that it is true. He hasn't calculated a high probability of its truth. He is convinced that it is true. Nothing in all creation will separate us from the love of God. There is no power...there is nothing in our unstable present or our uncertain future...nothing in our lives, nothing in death that will break the bond of God's love for us.

Paul does not make these arguments from his balcony at the Ritz-Carlton. He has endured or will endure every trial listed in this passage. He has looked at that place where the worst of humanity meets the love of God. He has seen the cross and he knows this love is the only truth we can stake our lives on.

What shall we say? Descartes said, "cogito, ergo sum" – I think, therefore I am. Some of us say, "Emo, ergo sum" – I shop, therefore I am. Athletes and politicians may say, "Vince, ergo sum" – I win, therefore I am. But Paul says, and asks us to believe with all our heart, "Amor, ergo sum" -- I am loved, therefore I am. Indeed you are. Will you say it? In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.