

# **Trinity United Methodist Church**

**July 26, 2020**

## **“Christ’s Victory, Our Victory”**

**Rev. Greg West**

### **Scripture: Romans 8:26-39 (NIV)**

**26** In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. **27** And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God. **28** And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. **29** For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. **30** And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

**31** What, then, shall we say in response 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, along with him, graciously give us all things? **33** Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. **34** Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. **35** Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? **36** As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered 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, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, **39** neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

### **Sermon**

I wanted to clarify a couple of things, or put in context a couple of things. One is that we just heard from an ancient book. Really, I guess you could better say an ancient library. The book of Romans, or the letter to the Romans, is part of the 66 books of the Bible. But it’s ancient—2,000 years ago and more. It’s also a foreign book, or a foreign

library. No Americans in the Bible. So it's best for us to try to get our minds into the context of what was going on. Paul, the apostle, is writing a letter, a treatise if you will, to the church in Rome. Two things that are radically different about that time: One is that they are the minority, these early followers of Jesus. It's a little band of women and men and boys and girls. And secondly, they are persecuted. It's hard for us to get our minds around that, because in this country we have been the majority for a long time.

So Paul is writing in that context, and he's trying to help the church in Rome understand salvation in Christ, the grand scheme. So we're just picking up here in chapter 8.

One other background thing: If you read Romans chapter 7, it's depressing. Always keep going to chapter 8. Chapter 8 has been called one of the pinnacles of the New Testament. We're only looking at a few verses from within the chapter, but it has heights to be explored that are beautiful. The theme is "Life in the spirit."

Paul is trying to help the church understand that Christian life is a supernatural life. It is God dwelling within. It's hard for us to imagine how big the shift was for them. These are Jews who worshipped the one true God, Yahweh, and they do it in Jerusalem on the Temple Mount at this amazing temple that Herod built. People would come from all around the known world to see this architectural wonder for the glory of God. And that was the place you needed to be to connect with God.

But then this radical shift. We're post-Pentecost in this text, and so the Spirit of God has come and filled the people. And now they've declared the body, your body, is the temple of the Holy Spirit. A radical shift. And so Paul is running on that theme.

The text opens with, "the Spirit (God's Spirit) helps us in our weaknesses." Do I hear a hallelujah? I've got some weaknesses, church. And how wonderful that there's help, because if there wasn't help, I would give up. But there is help from God. The Spirit helps us in our weaknesses. Paul later declares that when we are weak, we are strong, because God is in us and for us and at work. He is able to do what we are not able to do. Our part is to keep opening ourselves up to the Living God, to the leading of the Spirit.

He goes on and says, "We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans." I suspect if we were in a small group and sharing some personal things, there's been some times in our lives when we were at a loss for words with God. The pain was too great; the loss was so present, the confusion, the heartbreak – we didn't even have words. And as we tried to call on God, there's groans. There's something stirring within, and it's God's Spirit. God's Spirit stirring us and communicating through us. Some have thought that this is also a

reference to the gift of speaking in tongues. It could be, but it's certainly not limited to that.

So God is at work in you. Are you receptive to that work? I have to keep tuning myself in so I don't hinder the work of the Spirit.

Paul in different letters says, "Don't quench the Spirit," and "don't grieve the Spirit." So if we don't cooperate with the Holy Spirit, we will limit God's work in our lives. His power isn't limited, but He wants us to participate.

So God is trying to help us pray in the right way. It says the Spirit will help us pray in accordance with God's will. See, if I just pray, "God, I'd like a Lamborghini and a Maserati and one of each color for each different day of the week," that's not in line with God's will, I think it's fair to say. And so we have to yield ourselves to Christ and to the Spirit and He'll guide us.

I'm not sure if you're familiar with that short passage from Psalm 37 that says, "Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart." Two ways you can look at that, right? If I just delight myself in the Lord, I'll get the Maserati, right? No, no, no. Delight yourself in the Lord, and *His* desires, the desires of the Living God, will become my desire. Because we've been caught up in His beautiful movement on planet earth. So it's a laying down of our will and embracing of God's will. His plan is better than yours. That might sound harsh, but I'm a believer. It's way better than my plan.

And so in prayer, we're not trying to change God's mind. We're taking hold of God's willingness and saying, "Let's see it through, Lord. Let's see it through. Give me the strength. Raise up some others, that this, Your will, would be done and You would receive glory."

Paul goes on to this famous passage. You've probably heard sermons on it before. "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him and have been called according to His purpose." That scripture right there has been such a source of comfort to those going through hard times. Because there's times of difficulty and pain and mystery and confusion, and we cling to that. That God, even in the midst of this difficult time, is working for good.

What I think we need to be careful of, is we can take these scriptures and baptize them into American culture and the American dream. And we can sense that this verse is really saying, "I'm going to be upwardly mobile. I'm going to get the four-bedroom, two-car garage, couple acres," and that sort of thing. And we can interpret this so that "He's working for *my* good." It doesn't say that. He's working for good.

Remember, last week we talked about this kingdom that God was building on earth as it is in heaven. *That's* His main thing, and you have a part in that. But as Americans, we can be very individualistic and we can make ourselves at the center of the scripture.

If you were a Christian in Indonesia, you would read this very differently. Because in Indonesia, the church is a minority and they're persecuted. So they're not dreaming about the bigger house or the three or four cars of that sort of thing. They're dreaming about safety. They're dreaming that their churches wouldn't be burned and that their kids would have a place to grow up. And they're dreaming that the gospel might advance in Indonesia, that people might turn to Christ and away from the persecution that they're heaping upon the Christians.

We focus so often on the outward circumstances, and God is focused on the inner character development. So God works all things for good of those who love Him and have been called according to His purpose. He's shaping you. He's forming you into the image of Christ, that you would be like Jesus, blessing people wherever you go.

The scripture goes on into this more challenging passage, where it talks about God foreknew and He predestined, that they would be conformed to the image of His Son. He predestined and they were called and justified and glorified. This, we could spend a long time on, but to sum it up rather quickly, there's generally two views in the church on this. John Calvin is one and John Wesley is representing the other. Calvin's view is that those He predestined, he chose in advance. He foreknew, he called them. "These are the ones that will be saved." And there it is, that's done, it's already been decided. John Wesley believed that what God predestined was that whosoever believed in Jesus shall not perish, but would have eternal life. That what He predestined was that Jesus would be made known to the nations and that people, because of God's grace, would have freedom to say, "Yes. I repent. I choose Christ." And He's chosen you *first*.

Again, we could go into depths of that, but we'll go on. This scripture passage has so many heights and important things.

The next charge is that: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" There's a sense of victory in this whole passage. I don't know if you all have heard the one about the boy with the baseball bat in the back yard, got a big back yard, and he has a ball. He throws the ball up in the air and says, "I'm the greatest baseball player that ever lived." And he takes a swing, and the ball drops to the ground. He picks up the ball, confident as ever, and he throws it up and takes another swing. "I'm the greatest baseball player in the world!" The ball hits the ground. The third time, he says, "I'm the greatest baseball player in the world. He throws the ball up, swings as hard as he can, and misses. He just smiles this big smile and says, "What a pitcher!"

Church, what Paul is saying in this passage is, we're undefeatable. In Christ we are undefeatable. Because He's been victorious, we can be victorious. Paul, in another letter, says, "For me to live is Christ, to die is gain." So the worst thing that could happen to you in this life, death – that's an upgrade. *What have you got on me? What have you got on me?*

So if we grasp hold of this attitude and let it permeate our being, we will be powerful in the culture. Because the culture doesn't have this kind of hope. They don't have this sense of security. They don't know that God is for them. But they're looking for something that'll secure them. Some turn to a bottle. Some turn to illicit behavior. All kinds of things, trying to find some sense of stability. Those things will never give it, but *Christ will give it.*

Paul goes on to say, "He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all, how will he not also along with Him, graciously give us all things?" He's given you the greatest gift already. He didn't spare His Son. Christ was crucified for us, and He rose from the dead. If He's willing to do that, you think He's going to be cheap the rest of the way out? Oh, no. He's a gracious God, eager to bless His church.

But again, don't read this in an individualistic lens. Paul's talking about the church advancing and making Christ known in all the world. That's His vision, that the kingdom of God would overtake all the kingdoms of the world, not just that we'd have economic security and status and power and influence. He's not interested in that. He's interested in the kingdom of God advancing on earth.

Christ has died for us, and He's risen. And then we learn that in addition to the Holy Spirit interceding through us with groans too deep for words, we learn in this passage that Christ Himself is interceding for us. We're told in other passages that He's on the right hand of the Father, even now, praying for you. *"Father, bless the church. Father, give them grace. Father, give them courage. Protect them. Guide them."* We're being prayed for by Jesus Himself, the scripture says. Again, awesome. If God is for us, who can be against us? Christ's victory *is* our victory if we simply stay with him. If we simply abide in Christ.

So church, what are you facing? What are your difficulties? What are your challenges and problems before you? Have you given them to the Lord? Are you seeking His wisdom that you might advance through those or in those? Not just to win, but to be Christlike in the midst of those problems? What are your fears? And are they winning, or is faith winning? Do you believe that in Christ you are more than a conqueror through Him who loved us? That's what Paul again says. Isn't that a beautiful image? That you're more than a conqueror.

I was on a Zoom call this afternoon with some pastors, and we're actually going through the Book of Lamentations. I'm not sure why we chose that book. It's been heavy. That's a hard, hard book. But we're longing, all of us, for this vibrant, powerful church that's influencing the culture rather than the culture influencing the church. We have good news. We have a plan. The kingdom is the model. Are we advancing? Or are we letting fear and passivity overtake us?

William Barclay, the Scottish theologian, says, "The true test of faith is: Does it make wings to lift you up, or is it a dead weight to drag you down? Does it make life a joy, or does it make life a depression? Are people helped, or are they haunted? Does it carry you, or do you have to carry it?"

This life in the Spirit that Paul is talking about is this joyful embrace of Christ and letting supernatural power be in you to lead you and guide you. He never says it's going to be easy. In fact, he says it's opposite. But we don't have to live in fear, church. We don't have to live defeated lives. We should be on the advance. Remember, "the gates of hell will not prevail against the church," Jesus declared. That means we're breaking down the gates and advancing. Too often the church is more in a defensive position, a more passive position. We have to see this change.

Paul then talks about the threat of separation from the love of God. "What will separate us from the love of God in Christ?" But it's clear there's nothing. There's nothing that *can* separate us. Paul lists some hardships and difficulties and demons and problems and all kinds of things, but he says none of those will win.

Again, it's hard for us 21<sup>st</sup>-century Americans to get our minds around this. But listen to 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, where Paul lists some of his hardships, some of the things that he faced in advancing the gospel. He says, "I worked much harder. I've been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely. I've been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews 40 lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was pelted with stones. Three times I was shipwrecked. I spent a night and a day in the open sea. I've been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles. In danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea, and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep. I have known hunger and thirst, and I have often gone without food. I have been cold and naked."

Church, we've got it pretty good, huh? I haven't been there. But this was the scene of the first century. And again, we have to recover this passion.

When I was in seminary, one of my friends had been a pastor in Indonesia and he was doing some mission training at the seminary. I was in a prayer group with Herman

and had never met anybody that prayed for this nation and for the world like Herman. He was so often on his knees pleading with God for an awakening, for revival, for somebody in need. I learned a lot from Herman. One time he went back to Indonesia and then he came back to the prayer group, and when it was his time to share with us, he pulled out pictures. This is the first time that the persecuted church became a reality for me. The Muslims had come into his town and burned the churches, and in a number of cases they burned people inside them. And Herman, with tears in his eyes, showed us pictures of his pastor friend and his wife, charred, huddled in the corner, but on to glory. On to glory. And Herman was eager to get back to Indonesia to preach the gospel at the risk of his life. *At the risk of his life*. It shook me, meeting him, and ever since then I've followed groups like *Voice of the Martyrs* and *Open Doors*. If you're not familiar with those, pull them up on social media. *Voice of the Martyrs*, *Open Doors*. They track the persecuted church around the world. It will stir you from your comfort, and you'll have a sense of mission and drive.

Church, I do think we have it so good in this country—we get passive. And there's brothers and sisters on the other side of the world, and some not so far from here, that need our help. Church, I urge you to take risks for God. Take financial risks for God. Take resource risks for God. Take resource risks for God in the sense of giving your time. Go beyond and be stirred up.

One of my very favorite heroes of the faith is a woman named Amy Carmichael. She knew what it was like when Paul lists those hardships. This is a woman who was born in Ireland and spent 55 years in India without a furlough as a missionary. She was rescuing children from temple prostitution in India, as sometimes that was part of the Hindu practices. And 55 years without a furlough. Her biography is called, *A Chance To Die*. I recommend it. She writes this short poem I want to share with you. The poem is entitled, "*Hast Thou No Scar?*"

*Hast thou no scar?*

*No hidden scar on foot, or side, or hand?*

*I hear thee sung as mighty in the land;*

*I hear them hail thy bright, ascendant star.*

*Hast thou no scar?*

*Hast thou no wound?*

*Yet I was wounded by the archers; spent,*

*Leaned Me against a tree to die; and rent*

*By ravening beasts that compassed Me, I swooned.*

*Hast thou no wound?*

*No wound? No scar?*

*Yet, as the Master shall the servant be,*

*And pierced are the feet that follow Me.*

*But thine are whole; can he have followed far*

*Who has no wound or scar?*

Church, I don't want to give you a guilt trip. I really don't. But I do want to stir you up to action. There's a worldwide movement called the kingdom of God. Jesus initiated it when He came. He laid down His life and three days later He's risen, and He's poured out the Spirit on the church. On us. And we get to advance this kingdom. It is Good News. And one day, not far from now, we'll stand before the Almighty. And we want to hear that, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

But church, I think we can do more. I think we can do more. An honest assessment needs to be had. Do we live with the reality that there's a battle going on between light and darkness, between God and the forces of evil in this world? Do we live with the reality that people are lost without Christ? That their eternities are in jeopardy because they have chosen to live for themselves rather than to follow God? Will we go out of our way to make His love known and His message known?

Have we allowed pluralism and universalism to creep into us so that we kind of say, "Oh, it's whatever you want to believe." Listen, I respect people of every religion. But I have never seen anything as glorious as the gospel of Jesus. Has anybody else risen from the dead? Does anybody else have good news like that, that if we turn and follow Him, He'll give us as the free gift of God, eternal life, and He'll dwell within us? It is the greatest news that the world has ever heard.

Finally, I brought two short things. Years ago I was in a Salvation Army store and my wife was shopping for things, and I moved to the bookshelves. The book is *Modern Missions*. So I opened it up: 1897. Not so modern. But these are the better books. The men and women of God who went out in those times—amazing. And as my wife shopped, I opened it up. And it was talking about missions to Africa. And the quote is still in my mind. In this book, it's talking about a Wesleyan missionary, from the Wesleyan church. And it says, "I think it is with African missions, as it is with the building of a great bridge. One knows how many foundation stones have to lie in the ground buried and unseen to make that bridge complete. And if it is God's will that I be one of those foundation stones, lying in an African grave, I am content." They did that. The



missionaries out of this country in the 1800s, church – they packed their belongings in their coffins. *That's* the vision they had, to advance the gospel.

The other book is John R. Mott's book, *Strategic Points in the World's Conquest*, 1896. John R. Mott was a Methodist layperson who decided he needed to travel the world and get an assessment of how is the gospel advancing in Japan and Korea and Europe and everywhere around the world. And so he traveled the world, and then he wrote this. *Strategic Points in the World's Conquest*.

Are you more than a conqueror? We are. That's what God says. And so, church, again, I hope I've stirred you up. I hope you've seen the heights of Romans 8, where Paul is saying life in the Spirit isn't just for you. It's for you to take the gospel to the whole world.

He ends by saying, "I'm convinced that neither life nor death, nor angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Christ's victory is our victory if we abide in Him. Amen.

### **Closing Prayer**

God, stir us. Stir us by your Spirit. Where we're too comfortable, Lord, stir us to action. Lord, where we need comfort, we pray that your Spirit would be the comforter for us. God, sometimes we don't know what to do and how to do it, and we pray that you would give us wisdom, and conversations would happen. And in the pandemic that we wouldn't be passive, but You would show us ways that we could safely serve. Help us to be truly more than conquerors, Lord. We pray this for your glory and in your name, Jesus. Amen.