

Finding Our Center
Romans 8: 18-25, 35, 37-39

Faith and country. From time immemorial the two have been intertwined in volatile relationship. Rome, the setting for this Pauline epistle, was in the first century a time and place of phenomenal cultural and historical presence with its contributions of the republic form of government that is the pattern for the American system (and Presbyterian polity, too, I might add), an alphabet still used today, efficient highway systems that serve as models for contemporary transportation, mass entertainment venues and events like the Olympic Games that have led to professional sports on a mammoth scale. We would not be who we are without the mighty and imposing Roman Empire. Against such grandeur, such wealth, such power, the newborn Christian sect was miniscule, not very influential, and more like a mosquito on a summer night than threat to national security. Christians had not yet begun to suffer the widespread vicious and cruel persecutions that would soon come under Emperor Nero, but there was danger in affiliating with the loosely-organized Christian movement. Roman authorities - and people in general - were suspicious of these followers of Jesus, ones who claimed that Jesus had risen from the dead in defiance of all logic. It was rumored that these first believers practiced cannibalism for they spoke of eating the body and drinking the blood of their founder. The widespread talk of love made some decidedly uncomfortable and brought accusations of incest and sexual immorality, a most interesting charge considering the free-for-all hedonism of the Roman culture. Christians would not offer sacrifice to the Roman gods, an affront to society itself whose spiritual, entertainment, and even political practices were often centered in finding the appropriate appeasement for the gods. Christians were viewed as curious and non-conformists. Their most dangerous trait, however, was the stubborn and subversive refusal to worship Caesar as the supreme ruler in their lives and their continued denial of the Roman Empire as the kingdom of God. To be a Christian meant to always be on the alert, to struggle with the tension of safety and survival against the mandate to speak truth, and to never quite be assured of one's place in the world. It was to these people who constantly teetered on the edge of fear Paul wrote, "I

consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.”¹

The letter to the Romans has been viewed as one of the most influential of the writings of the early church. It is nothing short of a literary, theological, spiritual, and emotional masterpiece, for it seems to have the ability to peer into our hearts and souls and expose our journeys and struggles. While it exposes the inner workings of what it means to be people of God, it also intertwines faith, God’s grace, and God’s love into another sort of holy Trinity that is the center of our lives as followers of Christ. William Tyndale, one of the first to translate the Bible into English (and who was executed for doing so), said of it that “this epistle is the principal and most excellent part of the new testament a light and a way in unto the whole scripture.”² It was the letter to the Romans that inspired reformer Martin Luther to speak out against the very large and extremely powerful Catholic Church with the defiant claim that salvation comes through faith, not through intervention of a intermediary or human efforts. It is this letter that has brought millions to their knees in humble awe of the God whose vast and incomprehensible love brings hope to a broken world, even to the most shattered of people *no matter what events and circumstances might dictate*. Its words envelop us today when *our* place in the world suddenly seems so threatened and tenuous.

I have been preaching for over 25 years now, and I love the art and craft of preaching. From the first glimmer of ideas through the tedious and joyous research to the weaving together of what I have learned with the life of the congregation and the world around us, the development of a sermon is holy work indeed. There are desert times when I am convinced that I must be repeating myself, even though I know I wrote the words just a few days before. There have been oasis moments when all fell together beautifully, when I felt the palpable presence of God’s Spirit. Then there are most recent times when I suffer from an inertia that leaves me without words, without a message, without anything. A paralysis of preaching, I am calling this new experience, one I have discovered I share with many colleagues right

¹ Romans 8: 18 NRSV

² *Tyndale’s New Testament*, edited by David Daniel. Yale University Press, London and New Haven, 1989, 223.

now. One of them wrote to me yesterday, 'Can I just stand in the pulpit and weep?' What *do* you say in response to what is going on in this country?

This past week the administration in Washington unfurled a mind-boggling series of actions and orders that are antithetical to the Gospel, to everything we believe as followers of God:

- Walls and bans meant to exclude people who live in situations dangerous beyond our comprehension;
- Irrevocable harm to the creation whose care has been entrusted to us;
- Shutting down of communication with the public;
- The restoration of torture banned as unacceptable by almost everyone in the world;
- Exchanging truth for lies

Regardless of political affiliation, these are not who we are as people of faith. They do not reflect the gospel of Jesus Christ. There is so much to intimidate us, to inundate us. Our heads and our hearts spin in turmoil, unsure where to begin. Then Paul's words reach out to us across the centuries:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced 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.³

When the world seems to be hurtling out of orbit, we need to once more find our center, our center in the love of God, in the hope that God is always present, that in life and in death we *do* belong to God, and that there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that will ever change that.

In that center is our hope that humanity, indeed all creation, is in process toward a future shaped by God and God's grace. Paul spoke of the creation waiting "with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God."⁴ Centuries later Dr. Martin Luther King would put it another way in a sermon in California, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." In spite of the violence and

³ Romans 8: 35, 37, 38-39 NRSV

⁴ Romans 8: 19 NRSV

fear that dominated the world of his day, much directed pointedly at him, Dr. King believed in the hope that God's love would propel creation to a more just world, to one in which all were revered equally as God's own, to the hope that is centered in God's love.

When we feel loved, we can do all kinds of things, endure just about anything, we'll take risks and try new ventures. Out of love, God created the world and humanity, placing us in this amazing creation – so that we can love and be loved. Out of love, God sent the law to guide and shape a culture and society. Out of love, God sent the prophets to call us back home. Out of love, God sent Jesus to be one of us, to walk with us, to show us how to love and live. Out of love, God created the church. We need to find our center once more in that love.

John Shelby Spong, an Episcopalian bishop, wrote:

God is a universal presence undergirding all of life.... God, the source of life, calls us to live fully. God, the source of love, calls us to have the courage to be ourselves. So when we live, love, and have the courage to be, we are engaged in worship, we are expanding our humanity, we are breaking out of our barriers.⁵

As a church, we are called to center ourselves in the love of God. We must reconnect with God; we must let ourselves be loved. As we live, God's love will flow out from us and give us the courage to follow, to be the kingdom of God in a sometimes hostile world, to love as God loves. As we do so, the world, and we ourselves, will change. Hope becomes reality as together we become God's love. It is a love that welcomes the vulnerable with open arms, that protests loudly against injustice and untruth of all shades and flavors, that seeks to make love and not personal gain the guiding force of all our actions. In just a few moments we will gather in our annual meeting. It is a time for us to pause to consider who we have been and what we have done. We take a deep breath and search to find our moorings in the love of God as we look to the days to come. We remember that we as a congregation and as followers of God are people of hope in the solid certainty of God's love, a hope that shines defiantly against the darkness of the day.

⁵ John Shelby Spong. *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile*. NY: HarperCollins. 2009.

As we muddle through the madness and try to understand what is happening around us, it is in the faith that God's love is with us. Let us be ever vigilant, ever mindful of the people we are called to serve and the world we are called to nurture. And let us remember that at the center of who we are and what we do is the love of God. Hear now once more these beautifully moving words from Paul and let them be the center of all our living:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced 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.⁶

Amen.

© Rev. Melodie Long
United Presbyterian Church
Sackets Harbor, New York
January 29, 2017

⁶ Romans 8: 35, 37, 38-39 NRSV