

## God Wants YOU!

Romans 8:18-30

Cradock Presbyterian Church

October 6, 2013

If there was ever any doubt about God's desire for all of us to come back home, here's a passage of Scripture that leaves no doubt. Paul's letter to the church at Rome dispels all doubt about it forever. He builds the case, step by step, until the glorious climax we have here in chapter eight. Of course, you have to look at Paul's arguments backwards to figure it all out; but when you do, the words are fresh, they make sense even today, especially today. There's probably nothing better to hear on communion Sunday, especially WORLD Communion Sunday. God wants us!

Take the first part of our passage for today. The argument runs like this: the creation has been subjected to futility in the hope that it will be set free from its bondage to death. Now, you know about futility. Your lives are full of it. Especially living here in Hampton Roads, where we only have 3 ways to get across major water, and one of those is so far north it's next to worthless. You get bombarded every day with things that look pretty much futile. Think "Congress." Think "election for governor." Haven't you had about enough of that by now? Think about how hard you try to get ahead, and the prices on things keep going up and up and up, and the bills keep on coming. Not only that, but the country looks like it's falling apart. The *whole WORLD* looks like it's falling apart. Trying to do anything about it seems futile. Trying to do the right things does seem *futile*. The emotion that goes with all that is *frustration*. When is this all gonna get better? Sometimes, we'd do anything to escape the futility, the frustration.

The frustration for Paul's listeners, though, is much different than our 21st century futility/frustration is. Their frustration comes from their conviction that they're right on the cusp of everything getting better. But how much longer to wait? They did everything they knew they should, praying for their enemies, loving them, even, spreading the Good News, trying as hard as they could to bring the whole world to their risen Lord. Then God's Kingdom would come! But when, O Lord, when?

Doesn't that seem like a natural reaction? Those early believers expected Jesus to return any minute now. They were frustrated because they knew that when that happened, they would be free, and they could hardly wait. People will long for freedom no matter where they are. They'll want to be released from the bondage they're in, no matter what it is. Their contemporaries know from their preaching that the children of God are already, in a sense, free, and they long to see who who all those people are. When they know, then *they* can learn how to be free, too. The sufferings of the people to whom Paul writes are their assurance that in fact, they are those children. They already know their freedom in Jesus Christ. They already know that this world is not the final answer. That's why their sufferings "are not worth comparing to the glory about to be revealed" to those children. That's why they've been "subjected to futility," so that they will be dependent on God just as the unbelievers are. And when you've put yourself on that same level with others, you make it that much easier for them to come to belief.

What Paul's doing is setting up a comparison. The present futility is happening so that people will see that, ultimately, reliance on the world is futile and frustrating. But reliance on God sets us free. I say that, because on this day when we celebrate World

Communion, a uniting in the breaking of the bread and sharing of the cup with our brothers and sisters throughout the world, we should lift up what it is we celebrate. We celebrate our freedom from *enslavement* to suffering. This is not all there is! There is hope. There is something much more, something glorious, that we get to enjoy if we just endure the futility.

Paul tells the people that “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God.” Even if you are suffering now, my people, he says, there is a purpose, a heavenly use, for that. God does not allow suffering for no good purpose. Notice, it’s NOT about some mystical “plan” that is soon to unfold. It’s about something *in process*, happening *as we live*. The verb is in the present tense. Your suffering is not caused by God, or approved by God. But God will make something good come out of it! That is comfort when comfort doesn’t seem possible. To people who probably already had seen and felt persecution, who had tried their best but still suffered, these are powerful words indeed. How do we know these things? Paul makes it clear: God does this for those “who are called according to his purpose” – the very people to whom Paul writes this letter. That purpose began at the cross – to reclaim humankind as his children. The suffering of these believers is an extension of the cross, it is another, related way God can call people back to himself.

Now we get into the controversial area. “For those whom he *foreknew*,” writes Paul, according to the NRSV, “he also *predestined* to be conformed to the image of his son.” The first term gets translated correctly: “to have knowledge beforehand ” “Foreknew” is therefore accurate. It’s the second term that gives all the heartburn.

Προοριζω means either “to see before,” which we’ve already heard, or it means “to keep before one's eye's.” The only translation that makes sense to me here, if you preserve the original word order, is something like “For those whom he already knew, he saw to it that they would be conformed to the image of his son.” God *guaranteed* that they would be *like his son!* Why? “In order that he” – that means Jesus – “might be the firstborn of a large family.” Right. In other words, God was going to keep his people before his eyes, do anything he needed to do, to see to it that people like you and me would be kept in his care like Jesus, and therefore be kept as members of God’s family. In other words, my friends, God wants YOU!

It’s not a one-time thing, and it’s not an “I’ll take you as you are” proposition, either. Listen to verse 30. “And those whom he” – here’s our translation of the word again – “*kept his eye on*, he also called.” God is saying, “Hey! I saved you! I sent my son for you! And I’m going to make everything work for good. Come to me, I want you!”

But what if you’re totally convinced that you’re unworthy? Remember, most of the *prophets* didn’t think they were good enough, clean enough, worthy enough, to answer God’s call. In the presence of God, who could ever feel good enough? Paul says God has dealt with that: “And those whom he called he also justified.” That means, God has made everything right. Of course he has! In the cross of Christ everything has been made right. We can have and enjoy our relationship with God because God has acted to make it happen. God reached out to us to heal our relationship. God wants us! “And those whom he justified, he also glorified.” To be glorified means to be lifted up from the ordinary, to be exalted. God has lifted us up beyond the ordinary, beyond the suffering

of this world – even while we are still in it! – to be part of his holy family. The futility doesn't mean anything anymore.

The controversy over this passage was about the word “predestined,” the traditional translation of the one word. Some theologians of the 17th century made it into damnation for some, salvation for others, decided for all time, and nothing could change it. We can toss that controversy out. It's really about how God loves us so much he keeps his eye on us all the time, and works to keep us safe, and in his family. He sent his son to make everything right, so that we could become sons and daughters in that family. He must have wanted that to apply to everyone; when Jesus broke that bread and poured that cup in the Upper Room, he didn't put any limits on it. He simply said, “Whenever you do this, do it in remembrance of me.” That's the thing you need to remember, as you take that bread and grape today. They are symbols of God's making everything right, for everybody in the world, and making YOU his own. God wants you! God will never let you go! Think about these things, as you celebrate with this sacred meal today.