

Epworth Chapel on the Green
August 3, 2014
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Nehemiah 9:16-20
Psalm 78:14-20, 23-25
Romans 8:35-39
Matthew 14:13-21

Today's epistle lesson actually begins a few verses earlier in verse 31, where the apostle Paul asks: "What shall we say to these things?"

The "things" to which Paul refers includes his discussion in the previous eight chapters, where we learn that we are all sinners in the eyes of God, that we are made right with God not by our works but through the death of Jesus Christ. We learn that in our baptisms we die to our old life of sin, and through the power of the Holy Spirit living in us we live our lives in obedience to God's purpose for us rather than living as slaves to our sinful nature.

Abraham Lincoln once remarked that the real issue in life is not whether we are on God's side, but whether God is on *our* side. And the apostle Paul affirms in no uncertain terms here that God indeed is on our side, if by "our side" we understand Paul to speak of fallen humanity. God is not against us *for* our sin; God is for us *against* our sin.

How do we know this? Verse 32: "He who spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, will he not also with him freely give us all things?"

This is no small truth. This is a powerful reality. We are sons and daughters of God.

So what's the problem?

The problem is that believers might be tempted to think that their relationship with God translates to a life of comfort and ease, a life free of calamity, trouble, heartache, and even suffering.

When trouble *does* visit, then, some believers become discouraged and find themselves asking, "What's wrong God? Don't you love me anymore?"

That is the question which lies beneath the surface of this text this morning. When confronted with life in all of its messiness, people need to know: *Just how far does the love of God reach?*

Several years ago during a trying time in my life, I was driving home after making a visit to a church member in the hospital. As I drove, I turned the radio on. These were the words coming out of my speakers:

*You turn the key, then close the door behind you
Drop your bags on the floor.
You reach for the light, but there's darkness deep inside
And you can't take it anymore
'Cause sometimes the living takes the life out of you
And sometimes living is all you can do*

*Life is hard, the world is cold
We're barely young and then we're old
But every falling tear is always understood
Yes, life is hard -- but God is good.*

The singer continued:

*You start to cry 'cause you've been strong for so long
And that's not how you feel
You try to pray, but there's nothing left to say
So you just quietly kneel*

*In the silence of all that you face,
God will give you His mercy and grace
Jesus never said it was an easy road to travel
He only said that you would never be alone
So when your last thread of hope begins to come unraveled
Don't give up; He walks beside you on this journey home*

*Life is hard, the world is cold
We're barely young and then we're old
But every falling tear is always understood
Life is hard -- but God is good.*

[Pam Thum, "Life is Hard, God Is Good" from the album *Unknown*]

The words to this song are not lost on us this morning. Sometimes living does take the very life out of us. Sometimes life presents us with overwhelming challenges and obstacles that seem insurmountable.

Some of you are here today, and you literally don't know that comes next for you in your life. I don't pretend to have any or all of the answers this morning, but this much I do believe: *In the silence of all that you face, God will give you his mercy and grace.*

Are you familiar with the Serenity Prayer? It's found on everything from posters to coffee mugs. It reads, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference."

The prayer was written by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr earlier this century, but it was only a few years ago that I learned that there was more to the prayer than this familiar portion. Let me read it to you:

*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.
Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace.
Taking, as He did, this sinful world
As it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that He will make all things right
If I surrender to His will;
That I may be reasonably happy in this life
And supremely happy with Him forever in the next. Amen.*

Did you catch the line about accepting hardships as the pathway to peace? This is definitely true. But the apostle Paul takes it further. Paul tells the Romans that trouble, hardship, calamity, and suffering are *not merely the path to peace -- they are the stage upon which we win overwhelming victory in our lives.*

If you are a living, breathing human being today, you will experience your share of hard times in your life. Trouble *will* visit you. Tragedy will find you, and you may even know what it means to suffer.

But that does not mean that God is mad at you. And it certainly does not mean that God no longer loves you. All it means is that God wants to work through your experiences of pain and trouble to teach you what you need to know and to mold you into the person He wants you to be. All it means is that you have

an opportunity to become more like Jesus. All it means is that God is more interested in the *production* of your character than he is in the *provision* of your comfort.

As we come to the Table of the Lord this morning, let me remind you of something: There is no challenge life can throw at you that is able to take Jesus by surprise. There is nowhere that life can take you that is beyond the reach of his love and power.

Yes, life *is* hard. But God is good. As we come to the Table, come with faith, determined to focus your life more on the second part of that phrase than the first. Open your heart to the possibilities of his grace. For in all these things, we are more than conquerors, and overwhelming victory is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.