

IN THE MEANTIME . . .
ROMANS 8:26-39

When I was a child of about 6, I was suddenly overtaken by a very serious and life-threatening kidney infection. I can remember being rushed to the hospital in the middle of the night – held in the arms of my mother as my Dad drove the car.

Thanks be to God, I survived (obviously) and after a couple of weeks in the hospital I was able to return home. However, I was not able to return to my normal 6-year-old life. Rest and lots of it was the prescription from the doctor so that this terrible infection would not return.

Lots of rest meant that I could not return to school for the rest of the school year – but instead was tutored at home by a visiting teacher. I also could not play outside with my friends or in any way exert myself physically. No roughhouse, no running, no NOTHING as far as I was concerned! I had to go to bed early and take long naps every day. Because I was feeling fine by this time, this regime of rest seemed downright cruel.

And if that was not bad enough – the length of this prescribed rest was almost unfathomable for my 6-year-old mind. I was to follow this routine for **one year** – an eternity as far as I was concerned.

My parents assured me that this quiet way of life was only temporary. They often reminded me that eventually life would return to normal. They encouraged me to look forward to that time and to wait for it with excitement and anticipation – even making plans and dreaming about what I would be able to do.

However, my parents also knew that the promise of life back to normal was not all my little heart needed to ward off discouragement during this long time of waiting. Although they continued to reassure me that this time of rest would not last forever – they also knew I needed some help **IN THE MEANTIME** to help keep my focus off my 6-year-old troubles.

And, of course, they did not leave me to my own devices and resources to figure this all out. They were resourceful and inventive and planned things that helped make life interesting and fun.

Low-key visits were scheduled with friends and relatives, big brothers and sisters were relegated to play with and otherwise entertain me. Games and books were a daily staple and occasionally special foods and treats were made and eaten. In order to get out of the house, rides in the country in the family car became a regular pastime. (And gasoline was about 15 cents a gallon!)

Now, there is a reason, of course, why I told you this little story. It can, I think be a simple analogy for what we are going to consider tonight.

Our NT reading for tonight from Romans 8 needs to be seen in context. In fact, the first verse of the lesson, "**Likewise**, the Spirit helps us in our weakness . . ." indicates that we are picking up the text mid-thought and that Paul is referring to something he said in the previous verses.

In **Romans 7**, Paul goes on at length about the **inward struggle with sin** we all experience and the painful confusion it can cause in us.

This inner conflict causes him to cry out, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

Thankfully, Paul does not leave us there. He goes on to speak in **Romans 8** of the wonderful gift of the Spirit who lives in us and powerfully enables us to overcome sinful patterns – as we choose to live in the power of the Spirit – but this, too, can be struggle that requires great diligence.

But our inward struggle with sin is not the only suffering we contend with.

In our reading from last week in Romans 8, Paul speaks of a creation that groans because it is in bondage to decay and death -- and it longs to be liberated – made new – so that it can be all to be all that God created it to be.

But creation is not the only thing that groans. We too groan– waiting for our adoption and the redemption of our bodies – bodies that currently are subject to sickness, disease, aging and death.

Now we have the context in which our lesson for tonight is to be seen. It was written in the context of struggle and suffering – both within and without. We are caught, like I was as a child, in a time is full of struggle, suffering and a whole lot of waiting for things to get better.

And just as my parents encouraged me by reminding me that my predicament was temporary and that I needed to look forward and anticipate the time when it would be over, **Paul gives us the same encouragement.**

In **Romans 8:18**, he challenges us to see our present sufferings in light of eternity. He says: I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed in us . . .

Paul teaches us that – **Thinking of the future pleasure does help us get through the present pain.**

But in the meantime . . .

Our Father knows that we need more than just the hope of heaven to get us through our difficulties now.

And, thanks be to God, our loving heavenly Father has amply provided for us. The verses read to us tonight from Romans are full of supernatural help that is available to us **in the meantime** – as we wait for the day when God will make everything new, wiping every tear from our eyes and abolishing death, mourning, crying and pain once and for all –

So in the meantime . . .

Our Father does not leave us to our own devices and resources.

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness . . .

There is much we could consider from our text tonight, but I want to focus on just 3 things – 3 things that provide abundant help in our **meantime** . . .

I have worded these 3 things as 3 simple statements:

In the meantime . . .

- The Spirit **helps** us
- The Father is **for** us – and
- Jesus **loves** us

Let's look at the first statement – In the meantime, as we wait for that final release and liberation -- **the Spirit Helps us . . .**

Notice verses 26 & 27

8:26 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
with groans that words cannot express.

27 And he who searches our hearts
knows the mind of the Spirit,
because the Spirit intercedes for the saints
in accordance with God's will.

The Spirit helps us in our weakness – specifically in regards to prayer.

If we have ever doubted the absolute necessity of prayer, our text tonight should convince us once and for all of its incredible importance, because in our text tonight, we see that **Father, Son** and **Spirit** are all involved in prayer.

The Father receives the prayers of the Spirit and Son as they intercede for **us**.

We dare not take this for granted! It's amazing to think that the Spirit and Jesus (in verse 34) are praying to the Father for us!

Prayer is not a job God gives us to do; prayer is an activity of the **Triune God** that we are invited into. Do you sometimes feel like you are standing all alone when you pray? Well, you aren't! Ever! We never pray alone for prayer is an activity that is on-going amongst the Trinity --

And in the midst of struggle and suffering, **prayer is a crucial activity**. We have already said that our world is a far cry from the perfect, sinless earth that God originally created. Creation is groaning – and we are groaning and it doesn't take us long to figure out that we live in a world where God's will is not always done.

Prayer is important because prayer is the **primary, God-given way** in which we can help ensure that God's will **IS** done in our world.

This is why Jesus taught us to pray, “Father, may Your will be done on earth as it is done in heaven.” James tells us that the prayer of a righteous person is **powerful and effective**. Prayer makes a difference – in our lives, in the lives of those we pray for and in our world.

In the midst of a creation groaning to be released – prayer is an all important activity.

But we are weak when it comes to prayer – weak in a number of ways. Sometimes – as our text tells us – we don’t know what we ought to pray for. We wonder what God’s will is and so we are stymied in our prayer.

Or we may be weak in prayer because of some physical, emotional or mental pain that confuses us so that we are simply at a loss for words. Or our weakness in prayer might be a lack of **strength** or **endurance** or **faith** or **desire** or **assurance** or **focus**.

But the Spirit helps us in our weakness. In the midst of our struggling and suffering, he helps us by praying to the Father **with** us and **for** us – with groans that are reflective of our groans. And he prays perfectly for us, for his prayers are **always** according to God's will.

We are weak when it comes to prayer – but the Spirit is strong, so it's important that we **tune into the Spirit when we pray**. He is our **Helper**, but often we pray as if we don't need any help. We assume that we know what God's will is or how it is that we should pray about something.

Instead, we need to **wait** – and **listen**. We need to see how the Spirit is praying so that we can follow His lead. As we wait, He can fill us with His **thoughts** and let us see with His **eyes** and enable us to experience His power – and we don't have to worry about words because the Spirit and we can pray with sighs too deep for words.

What a gift this is! In the midst of struggle and suffering, the Spirit helps us in our weakness! Through Him and with Him we can pray perfectly and powerfully so that the Father's will can be done on earth.

So, In the meantime . . . The Spirit helps us . . .
And the Father is for us . . .

How does the Father show that he is for us? There are several ways mentioned in our text tonight, but I want to primarily focus on one: The Father demonstrates he is **for us** by **working in all things for our good**

Romans 8:28

*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.*

This has to be one of the most **well-known, most-loved** promises in scripture – and rightly so! And It is an amazing statement when we stop to think about it.

The promise is that regardless of the source of our suffering, whether it be the consequences of our own sinful choices **or** actions or the consequences of another’s choices or actions, **or**

whether we are the **casualty** of the spiritual warfare that rages in our cosmos **or** whether we are **just a victim** of living in an world that does not function in the beautiful and perfect way that God created it to – It doesn't matter what the **SOURCE** of our distress or suffering is – Or **whoever** or **whatever** caused it –

WE KNOW (with assurance) that our heavenly Father will amazingly, creatively and powerfully work **good** out of our pain, suffering, disappointment and even sin.

This working all things for the good is a **gift and promise God makes to his children** –those who love him and have been called according to his design and purpose.

The ultimate good that God works in us, we are told in v. 29, is his conforming or transforming into Christ-likeness – a process that has great value in this and the life to come. But God can be very **creative in our circumstances** too --

2 examples from scripture come to mind:

Joseph, when he spoke to his brothers who had betrayed him and sold him into slavery and as a result had experienced years of suffering and hardship, said, *As far as I am concerned, God turned into **good** what you meant for **evil** . . .”*

And then there was King David – and his sin of adultery and murder – and all the aftermath of his actions. David repented and yes, was forgiven, but we still wonder how God could actually work good out of such **grievous** sin? Yet it was through the union of David and Bathsheba and their ancestral line that Jesus, the Messiah and Savior of the world was born!

God working all things for good -- It's a mystery we can hardly fathom --

There is a story I heard many years ago that has become a favorite of mine. It is a story of how **authentic, hand-made Oriental rugs** used to be made in the Middle East. (And perhaps still are – I don't know) It is said that the strands for the rugs were hung on wooden racks and weavers – usually women and children -- would stand behind the racks, and following a pattern laid out by the master designer, would string a thread in and out of the **warp** before finally **knotting** it.

When making a rug, the knotting of the threads is the most intricate and time-intensive part of the process. An area rug might take months to knot, with five weavers making up to 6,000 knots a day.

But sometimes, it is told, the weavers would make a **mistake**, perhaps putting in blue thread instead of red or following the wrong pattern at the wrong place. But when this happened -- **Mistakes are never ripped out** –

Instead, when a mistake was made, the master designer would come and examine the mistake and then he would cleverly and beautifully incorporate the mistake it into a **NEW DESIGN** – which often resulted in a rug that was more beautiful than the one originally designed.

Father God is our Master Designer – and he takes our “mistakes” our broken-ness, hurts, suffering and sin – and from it creates a new design – often more beautiful than the one originally planned.

8:31 What, then, shall we say in response to this -- Paul asks?

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?

God takes our deepest sorrow and weaves into a pattern of good

So -- In our meantime . . . as we experience the hardships of life and before that someday when glory will be revealed in us . . .

- The **Holy Spirit helps us**
- The **Father is for us**

And finally

- **Jesus loves us**

The emphasis in these last verses of Romans 8 is the **love of Christ** – and Paul begins with a question (in verse 35) – **Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?**

Even though this is a rhetorical question, Paul makes his point by answering it.

First, he lists a variety of **adversities** – things like **trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger or sword** – that if experienced, might cause us to **doubt** whether or not Jesus really loves us.

Then he mentions some spiritual **adversaries** that will actually **try** to separate us from the Love of Christ – enemies like death, demons or supernatural powers – or intangibles like **time** (the present or the future) and **space** (height or depth).

But because of the superiority and strength of Christ’s love – Paul can emphatically state that **NOTHING in all creation is able to separate us from the love of Christ.**

And that nothing includes OURSELVES. Jesus' love is constant and unconditional.

It is not dependent on us at all in any way – not our **behavior**, our **attitude**, our **feelings** or our **works** – NOTHING in all creation can separate us from Jesus' love.

And that, of course, gives us great comfort and security as we go through the struggles and suffering of life. We are kept and bound in the love of Christ – and nothing can change that.

But I think there is more implied here than just the power and strength of Christ’s love to keep us secure in the adversities of life.

As I considered these verses over the last couple of weeks, I began to wonder why the **LOVE of Christ** was emphasized – and not, say the **PRESENCE** of Christ.

Would the meaning of these powerful statements be altered if Paul had asked – Who shall separate us from Christ? Or the **presence** of Christ? Is there something special and unique about the **love** of Christ that we need to see?

After all, what, exactly, is the love of Christ? How might we define it or explain it? What is the origin of Christ's love for us?

Love, of course, existed long before there were any humans to love. God IS Love and Father, Son and Spirit have always been a circle of **shared life and love** – existing in **joyful and passionate union**.

God is a relational being and has always existed relationship – a relationship full of togetherness, fellowship and communion – a relationship that is rich and beautiful and full of delight.

And this is important to know because it explains our very existence --

God IS Love – and Love, by it's very nature is **inclusive** and longs to **share itself**. And so the Father, Son and Spirit created in order to **share with their creation** what they already have in loving relationship.

In Genesis, we see that the whole idea behind creation was inclusion and sharing – Let US make humans in OUR image – and give them dominion and let them rule . . .

We were created **because** of love and **in** love and **out of** the love – the love of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Spirit.

Theologian, C. Baxter Kruger in his book titled *The Great Dance* expresses the purpose of our creation this way:

The Father, Son and Spirit created us
so that we could participate in their life together,
so that we could share in their **knowledge** and **laughter** and **fellowship**,
in their **insights** and **creativity** and **music**,
in their **joy** and **intimacy** and **goodness**,
so that all of it could be played out in us and in our ordinary lives.

But creating us was not enough. We are made in the image of God, but we are not God. How could a God whose thoughts and ways are so much higher than ours communicate a **personal** love?

It seems obvious that in order for God to **share his life and love with us**, He would have to become one of us. And that, of course, is what the incarnation is all about – God becoming human – for the purpose of sharing LOVE. How else could God's love actually reach us? How else could we really experience it?

And so Jesus became human in order to share the passionate love of the Trinity with us. He is the **mediator** between God and humans.

It is IN him that the divine and the human meet and share life. Because of Jesus, we can **know** and **experience** and be **drawn up** into the **joyful, passionate** love of God and share in all things good and beautiful – regardless of our struggles, sufferings or circumstances.

And, I think, it is important to see that Jesus didn't just make the connection of love by becoming human – but he remains our **connection** or **mediator**.

The incarnation is not over – it's not an event of the past. Jesus ascended into heaven with a body (the disciples watched it rise) and he will **bodily** come again (the creeds and doctrines of the Church stress this fact).

So, even now, Jesus is at the right hand of the Father – **fully divine, fully human** – interceding for us. He continues to be our connection, our mediator to the shared life and love of the Trinity.

This is why, I think, Paul makes such a strong statement about the **Love of Christ**. It is through the love of Christ for us – that we share in the **Life and Love of God**.

Through the **Love of Jesus** we have the abundant life – life to the full – the very life and love of Father, Son and Spirit.

We are not on the outside, looking in. Instead, we are in the middle of the party.

Jesus reached out in love and drew us into God's circle of life and love – and nothing can prevent his love reaching us – not **struggle**, or **suffering** or **hardship** or **danger** or death or **demons** or the **present or the future** or **any power in all creation**.

Nothing can separate us from being drawn **up into the passionate love of God**. This is our **purpose** and our **identity**. This is what life is all about.

This is why we find **beauty** and **joy** the relationships and the activities of life – things like **picnics** and **gardening** and **baseball** and **friendships** and **babies** and **fishing** and **romance** and **dancing** and **laughing** and **loving**.

These are the ways that the love of Father, Son and Spirit are being played out in our lives and the **Love of Christ** is what makes it possible – and nothing can separate us from that Love – and through it we are **more than conquerors**.

Friend, I don't know what you may be **struggling** with tonight – Perhaps something **within** – a **heart** issue Or some kind of **difficulty or suffering without**.

But know this:

Your present suffering is nothing compared to the glory that will be yours someday –

And in the meantime:

Abba Father has not left you to your own devices and resources.

In the meantime:

The **Spirit helps** you –

The **Father is for** you –

Jesus **loves** you

Amen