

“All Things for Good!”

Meditation on Romans 8:26-39

July 30, 2017

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

26 “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. 27 And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. 28 We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. 31 What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? 32 He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? 33 Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. 35 Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted 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, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor 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.”

I began visiting Jane and her husband, Bailey, in their Rockledge home not quite 2 years ago. They were hungry for news from the church for they were unable to attend because of Jane’s health. Although she used a walker, then a wheelchair later on, Jane always managed to be a gracious hostess. She offered me a comfortable chair in their formal living room and less formal sitting room, when she got to know me better. She always offered refreshments. Then, she’d send Bailey off to the kitchen to fetch us cookies and cold drinks. He was her legs and her eyes, when her vision grew dim. They had been married since 1947.

Both were from Atlanta. They met in Tennessee at a Presbyterian youth conference at Maryville College when they were just 16. They shared a love for the Lord and a commitment to the Church at an early age. It wasn’t love at first sight, Jane said. They didn’t start dating till years later when they met in person again, “by chance.” God had a plan and purpose for them from the very beginning!

After high school, Jane earned a bachelor’s degree from the Florida State College for Women in Tallahassee (now FSU) and taught music in public schools in Atlanta. After she and Bailey married and moved to Knoxville, TN, Jane continued to teach music, but when she saw the low literacy levels of her students, she felt stirred to teach reading. Years later, after they moved to Florida and had five children of their own --

Rena and Joy, twins Richard and Bill, and Betsy, the baby-- Jane taught 3rd grade at St. Mark's Episcopal Church School in Cocoa.

Seeds sown in her heart as a child stirred Jane to love God's Word. She studied it faithfully on her own, using a Giant print Bible in later years. She'd ask Bailey, "Did you read your Bible today?" When she and Bailey joined Merritt Island Presbyterian Church in the 1970s, she poured herself into children's ministries. She was ordained an elder and served as Sunday school superintendent. She played piano at the Sunday school opening, songs like, *This Little Light of Mine. Jesus Loves Me. I Love You, Lord. And This is the Day.*

Meeting with the family after Jane's death, they brought me an envelope in which she had written directions for her funeral. She didn't want fuss or to be a burden to the church she loved so much. And she didn't want the service to be all about her. She chose two favorite hymns--*Onward Christian Soldiers* and *Here I Am, Lord*. And what amazed me was that one of the scriptures she chose: Romans 8:38-39, I was already planning to preach on! It is part of our lectionary readings for today and comes up only every 3 years! I am sure it was all part of God's plan. God's Word still speaks to us a message as life giving as it was for believers thousands of years ago.

Paul wrote his letter to the Roman church while he was on house arrest. His crime? Sharing the good news of God's love, revealed when he "did not withhold his own Son," as he says in Romans 8:32, but "gave

him up for all of us.” He assures us that God’s Spirit lives in our hearts and helps us through our most troubling times. Can’t you just imagine how Paul feels? How discouraged, frightened, lonely and weary he is, when he speaks of the Spirit that will pray *for us* in our weakness, when “we don’t know how to pray as we ought” ? Paul is admitting to his own brokenness. We are comforted to know that “God searches the heart” and “knows the mind of the Spirit” that lives within us, when words escape us. When we are weak--grieving, lonely, scared, in pain--the Spirit of our gracious God who did all the work for our salvation continues to intercede for us so that we may do the will of God. We are *predestined*, Paul tells those who have heard Christ’s call and chosen to follow him in 8:29. We *will be “conformed”* by the power of the Spirit--not through our own wisdom or strength -- changed, into the “image of His Son.” He will make us like Jesus!

Because of God’s plan and power within us, “*all things* work together for good,” Paul declares in 8:28, “for those who love God and are called according to his purpose.” But the meaning must be teased out of an awkwardly phrased Greek sentence. Making things more difficult, ancient manuscripts were hand copied, so they often use different words as scribes made changes; some omit the word “God” entirely! Possibilities for translation and interpretation include God being the subject, as in the New American Standard Bible’s “God causes all things to work together for good.” Or the NIV: “in all things God works for the good of those who love him.” Or “things” could be the subject, as in the NRSV: “all things work together for good for those who love God.” Or the King James’: “And we know that all things work together for good to

them that love God..."

The key point to be gained from this verse is that God is sovereign! He is the directing force behind all the events of our lives. God is in control! It doesn't mean that everything that happens is good! But God can use something humans intend for evil for God's good purposes, such as in the story of Joseph, whose jealous brothers throw him into a pit and leave him to die, but Joseph rises to become a powerful man in Egypt. He forgives his brothers, saying in Genesis 50:20, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people."

The second problem with this verse is what does Paul mean by "all things?" Going back to verse 18, we may conclude that Paul is speaking of our sufferings. He says, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us." And then in verse 35, he lists "things" that God is working in and through for His purposes: ³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" And in v. 37 : ³⁷No, in all *these things* we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

Then, we arrive at the end of this passage--Paul's summation--and the scripture that Jane chose to encourage those who may be grieving the loss of their loved ones, those who may worry that this life is all there is and that death could mean separation from not just our families and friends, but from the God we love and serve. "For I am convinced," Paul says, "that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things

present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor 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.”

When our congregation heard that Jane had passed away, people came to me with stories of how she had reached out to them, encouraged them to take risks and follow their calling. She was a good listener, a compassionate friend to many.

Mary Lou Tipton, our performing arts ministry director, said she would not be doing the ministry she is doing now with the children and youth if it hadn't been for Jane. Just before directing her first Sunday school musical program, Mary Lou felt anxious. Jane clasped her hands and said, “You can do this, Mary Lou! And I will play piano.” Not long afterward, Kids Klub and the MIPC players were born.

Leslie Mitchell, our Praise Band Director, shared how she had begun attending MIPC with her little boys when she saw Jane playing praise songs on the piano for the Sunday school opening. Leslie asked if Jane ever needed a substitute. “Oh, yes,” Jane said, enthusiastically. Later, Jane asked her, “When are you going to join the church?” So she did.

Friends, the Spirit of God is alive in our hearts, helping us every day. Be encouraged that in our weakness, the Spirit prays for us and is working in and through us, changing us into the image of God's Son. Be a compassionate friend. Be a good listener. Don't be afraid to take risks as you seek to find your calling and serve others with the gifts God has given you. And remember, today and always: nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Let us pray. Holy One, thank you for not withholding your only Son and for your promise to give us everything we need as we seek to walk in your loving ways. Where there is doubt, give us confidence to take risks and to share our gifts and resources for the sake of building your Kingdom. Stir us to serve our Savior with our lives as He gave himself up for all of us. Remove all fear from us. Strengthen our faith so that when others seek to persecute or condemn us, we remember that you have had a plan for us since before we were born and that you will use ALL things for your good purposes. Thank you for your Spirit that lives in our hearts, that intercedes for us when we can't find the words to pray, and is working in and through us, conforming us into the image of your Son. And thank you for the gift of our dear sister Jane, that her suffering and pain have ended, and she is in your presence, embraced by your everlasting love. In Christ we pray. Amen.