

Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 26, 2020

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Pasadena, Maryland

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Finally, baseball is back. I can hardly describe the sense of relief and satisfaction that washed over me on Friday night when that first pitch sailed into the catcher's mitt, and the Orioles started their season. For two whole innings I just sat on the couch transfixed. And then in the bottom of the third the Red Sox scored 4 runs, and I went to get a beer. And then in the bottom of the fourth they scored 6 more. And then after we picked up one in the top of the sixth the Sox came back and got 3 more. So I went back to my bedroom and said my prayers. Later on I saw that the team tweeted they were only one game out of first place.

(But we won yesterday, so there's that.)

As I think back to Friday evening I'm reminded of seminary, when my class on Paul and his letters got to Romans. By that point I had taken most of my other Bible classes, and I had encountered the Scriptures in new and exciting ways. I especially thrilled to my Old Testament classes, believe it or not, wrestling with some of the strangest texts in our Bible. So when we got to Romans I remember remarking that reading Romans was like drinking lemonade for the first time in the summer. You forget how good it is, how perfect it is on a hot day to have something cold and sour and sweet, something you hadn't had since the last summer. On Friday night, watching the Orioles play for the first time since September was like that. And in the late '90s when I was in seminary, reading Romans after having been away from it

for a while was like that—like that first sip of lemonade it grabbed all of my attention and all of my affection.

One of the reasons Romans can do that is the text we have for today. Many people will say that chapter 8 of Romans is their favorite chapter in the whole Bible. It starts off with the resounding assurance that “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (v. 1), and it finishes with the resounding assurance that not a single thing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (v. 39).

In our Romans passage today Paul talks about the doctrine of predestination, which is addressed in the 39 Articles of the Anglican Reformation (1571). Article XVII reads,

Predestination to Life is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby (before the foundations of the world were laid) he hath constantly decreed by his counsel secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom he hath chosen in Christ our of mankind, and to bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation, as vessels made to honour.

What does it mean to be vessels made to honour? The 17th Article goes on to say,

Wherefore, they which be endued with so excellent a benefit of God, be called according to God's purpose by his Spirit working in due season: they through Grace obey the calling: they be justified freely: they be made sons of God by adoption: they be made like the image of his only begotten Son Jesus Christ: they walk religiously in good

works, and at length, by God's mercy, they attain to everlasting felicity.

Now, this immediately presents three problems. The first one is, What does it mean if you don't always "walk religiously in good works?" Does that mean that you haven't been predestined to life, that you haven't been "deliver[ed] from curse and damnation," that you won't "attain to everlasting felicity?" I don't think that's what it means at all. Remember, Paul says at the beginning of the chapter that there's now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. And here at the end he says that nothing can separate us from God's love. The process of growing into being who we really are is not a smooth one. But the fact that we fall so many times doesn't mean that we aren't learning to walk. Like every loving parent, God looks on us with love, pity, and perhaps a bit of amusement when we fall over ourselves; and, like every loving parent, is always ready to pick us up, kiss the boo-boos, and invite us once again to walk towards him. The fact that we are grieved by sin, the fact that we are disappointed when we fall short, the fact that we are embarrassed when we think of our failures—these all demonstrate to us that we know who and what we ought to be, and that we long to make that more and more the reality of our daily lives.

It's a different thing, the 17th Article says, for those who are not walking towards God. "For curious and carnal persons, lacking the Spirit of Christ," the Article says, "to have continually before their eyes the sentence of God's Predestination, is a most dangerous downfall, whereby the Devil doth thrust them either into desperation, or into [recklessness] of most unclean living, no

less perilous than desperation.” Here’s the second problem: the doctrine of Predestination brings death to these people “lacking the Spirit of Christ” even as it brings life to us. Why? Well, let’s look at how the author of the Article describes these people: as “curious and carnal.” Carnal, we can understand—these are people who say, “If it feels good, do it,” and live that way, an unclean way of living that can distract you from reality for a little while. The problem is, though, eventually the next morning comes, and you wake up into it.

Those described as “curious” will always wonder, and investigate, and question, and that’s fine for a while. But some questions have answers. Often we don’t like those answers, so we try to leave the question open in hopes of finding a better answer. It’s kind of like doing your taxes and finding out you owe a bunch of money, and then figuring you’ll try to run the numbers again another day to see if there’s something you missed. Now, if you’re a grown-up, you will finally bite the bullet and deal with the situation. If you’re not, you try to hold out hope that there’s something else. (Eventually, the IRS will come along and make things clear to you, with penalties and interest.) So when you hold questions open even when you know better it’s inevitable that you’ll end up in the kind of despair the author of the Article talks about. If Christ is our only hope, but you’re holding out for a different one, then hopeless is exactly what you’ll be.

Now, some people don’t like that idea. That’s the third problem, namely, the objection to the very idea of election. How can it possibly be that a loving God would choose some and not others? What possible purpose could that serve? And how can

that possibly be just? Paul does address those questions in the coming chapters, so all I'll say here is that he does have answers to this objection. But that's not what he has for us here. Here in Romans 8 he is giving us not answers to objections but grounds for hope, and joy, and peace. That's why the author of the 17th Article also says that,

the godly consideration of Predestination, and our Election in Christ, is full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons, and such as feel in themselves the working of the Spirit of Christ, mortifying the works of the flesh, and their earthly members, and drawing up their mind to high an heavenly things, as well because it doth greatly establish and confirm their faith of eternal Salvation to be enjoyed through Christ, [and] doth fervently kindle their love towards God.

“You didn’t choose me,” Jesus told his disciples, “I chose you.” He went on to tell them, “and I appointed you that you should go and bear fruit that lasts” (John 15:16). That’s the whole purpose of election, by the way: God always chooses people for a purpose. He doesn’t just choose us so that we can be special, he chooses us so that through us he can make a difference. I think that’s what Jesus is talking about in some of our parables today—like a little mustard seed, like yeast, something small and unimpressive brings about something new, something generative, something that makes a change that lasts. Through his chosen people, God furthers the incursion of his Kingdom into enemy territory.

And it is perfectly fine to be happy about that. The fact that we are God’s chosen is indeed “full of sweet, pleasant, and

unspeakable comfort” when we think about it. Don’t let anyone steal that joy from you. The enemy wants nothing more than for you to doubt God’s goodness and his love for you. He wants to take the blessed doctrine of election that assures you of forgiveness and make it something for you to feel conflicted about. Don’t let him. Paul didn’t know the song, but it expresses his teaching here in Romans 8 so beautifully:

*I sing because I’m happy,
I sing because I’m free;
For His eye is on the sparrow,
And I know He watches me.*

Amen.