

“More Than Conquerors: Saints, Reconciliation, and the Face of God”

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
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Romans 8: 31-39

Today, as you know, is All Saints’ Sunday. All Saints’ Sunday is not just about celebrating saints with a big S (the ones who lived exemplary lives, died, and were canonized by the Roman Catholic Church). Nor is this day simply about lauding those whose lives on earth were extraordinary examples of faith, hope, and love whether they ever became capital S saints or not. For me, All Saints’ Sunday is the day in the Christian year when we are particularly aware of our ongoing connection to those who have gone before us in life and death, in faith and doubt, in goodness and imperfection. We mark that connection here through reading the names of family and friends who have died in the past year and by sharing in the Lord’s Supper, looking forward to that day when we all sit at table in God’s reign of perfect love. We also mark the connection by reflecting on what those who have gone before continue to mean to us—the ways they have shaped us, for better and for worse, as complex and imperfect as they were and as we continue to be. All Saints’ Sunday is a day to remember that we are, regardless, all saints—all called out by God to live lives of faith, hope, love, and service as we travel this road of life together.

With an eye to all of this, and to chapter 8 “On Rivalry and Reconciliation” in the Brian McLaren book that many of us have been reading, I’ve chosen to read a passage from the 8th chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans this morning. As I read the last 9 verses of that chapter I want you to listen for what it might say about our connection to God and to one another—and what difference that might make in how we live in the here and now. Bear in mind that just before this section begins, Paul has been writing about hardship, suffering, and human weakness and God’s presence in the midst of all of this. It is with *these* things in mind (hardship, suffering, and human weakness) that Paul writes the words of today’s text:

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? 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? Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. 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. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

*‘For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.’*

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor 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 do love what Frederick Buechner writes about All Saints’ Day—

“On this day it is not just the Saints of the church that we should remember in our prayers, but all the foolish ones and wise ones, the shy ones and overbearing ones, the broken ones and whole ones, the despots and tosspots and crackpots of our lives, who one way or another have been our

particular fathers and mothers and saints, and whom we loved without knowing we loved them and by whom we were helped to whatever little we may have or ever hope to have of some kind of seedy sainthood of our own.”¹

Buechner’s words there acknowledge, as he so often and deftly does, the truth about human beings—that there is some degree of pain and brokenness, more or less, in every life, in every family. Buechner, whose father committed suicide during the Great Depression, whose mother could be hard-edged and petty, and increasingly so as she aged... Buechner, who watched anorexia nearly rob him of his daughter and underwent so many other disappointments in life, knows of what he speaks. And we do, too.

None of us is a perfect saint. Nor have we ever, ever known one. In fact, the ones we revere as close to perfect may indeed have been closer on a spectrum to kindness, goodness, courage, trust and the like than we are, but they would tell you themselves that they had flaws, too. I love what Nelson Mandela said when somebody tried to confer sainthood on him. “I am not a saint, unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying.”²

I can tell you, as the veteran of preaching for hundreds of funerals and memorial services, that there is not one I have conducted for a person without flaws and foibles. There were far too often broken relationships in those lives that could have stood some healing. There were things that went unsaid, pains that went unaddressed, hopes that were unrealized in all of those lives. That’s just the way life is.

On All Saints’ Sunday, we can name that truth, but hold it in light of an even larger truth, the one that Paul proclaims, that in the final analysis, after the penultimate theology of “too late” and “not enough” and the power of sin and evil and hatred in the world, there is the ultimate word of a love that is stronger than all that would separate us from it, including ourselves.

“What shall separate us from the love of God?” Paul writes, “Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword?”

I remember the first time I ever preached on this text. It was at an assisted living facility in Atlanta where I was serving as a chaplain during my intern year in seminary. There, at Wesley Woods Geriatric Center, in one of the first few sermons I’d ever preached, I said this to bring the point home. “Who or what shall separate us from the love of God? Shall wheelchairs or walkers, or Parkinson’s or Alzheimer’s, or the inability to see or to hear, or the loss of loved ones? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors, through him who loved us!” I preached that message, not nearly fully enough appreciating the power and truth of those words. With each succeeding year of life they have become more and more powerful to me. What about for you?

That day at Wesley Woods, I skipped over the 36th verse, where Paul quotes a psalm to a group of people who knew what it was to be persecuted for what they believed and probably despaired about that. “It is written,” Paul wrote, quoting Psalm 44, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long, we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” That’s when he continued, “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”

¹ Buechner, Frederick. *The Sacred Journey: A Memoir of Early Days*. ISBN 0060611839

² Mandela, Nelson. (Acceptance speech for the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy Enron Prize for Distinguished Public Service, Rice University, Houston, TX, November 1999)

More than conquerors. Written to a group of persecuted people who probably in their wildest fantasies would have liked to conquer those who had hurt them and persecute them right back, even harder.

More than conquerors. What does Paul mean by that? Is he saying that they will be superconquerors, metaconquerors, conquerors on steroids? I don't think so.

It seems to me that Paul might rather mean that to be more than a conqueror through him who loved us is to be a reconciler, a forgiver, one who loves rather than dominates. Perhaps to be more than a conqueror means that the victimized doesn't become the victimizer, that the hurt one doesn't become the one who inflicts pain right back.

Just last night, the phone rang at our home. It was my sister-in-law, my brother Tim's wife, Wendy. Friday night, one of Tim and Wendy's close friends, a woman named Kelly Turner, who worked at Southwest Airlines with Wendy, was murdered by her boyfriend. Stabbed to death in some kind of rage.

Wendy had spent the day getting the word out to her other friends and coworkers, before they heard it on the news.

She needed to talk. And she spent a long time on the phone with Judith. Something in her needed to be reassured of the ultimate truth, that in the face of murder, even murder, love still reigns supreme. She asked for prayers for Kelly's family and for her friends. Then she and my brother did something else. Because of the sort of people they are, the sort of Love they serve, they asked for Judith to pray for (and have our churches pray for), not just Kelly's family and friends, but the man who murdered Kelly.

Have you seen the movie *Places in the Heart*?³ It is set in a small town in Texas in 1935. The film starts with a worship service.

Sally Field is in the movie. She plays a young mother named Edna Spalding. Her husband Royce is the sheriff in their small town and he's shot, accidentally, by a young African American boy, named Wylie.

This young black boy, Wylie is summarily gathered up before any sort of trial can happen and dragged behind a truck, by white vigilantes, for all the community to see, including Royce Spalding's family, as a warning that even an accidental trespass by blacks on whites will not go unpunished.

As the movie progresses, Edna goes through plenty of hardship as she tries to make ends meet trying to raise a family and to keep her farm, with cotton to plant, pick and sell. There is plenty of other activity throughout the movie, a lot of struggle, a lot of pain.

The movie ends, as it began, in church. Wayne passes communion to Margaret and Margaret passes it to the next person and that person passes communion to the next. The scene continues with communion getting passed from character to character from the movie, both the living and the dead. The last words of the movie are "Peace of God" spoken by the black boy Wylie to the sheriff he had accidentally killed.

³ *Places in the Heart*. dir. by Robert Benton. 1984, TriStar Pictures.

Nothing. Nothing. Nothing will separate us from the love of a God. Not the love of a God like that.