

Psalm 119:129-136
Romans 8:26-39

Ninth Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
July 30, 2023

Settled Out of Court

Introduction to the Psalm

In the longest of the psalms, we hear a prayer for relationship, guidance, rescue, and blessing. Listen to these words from Psalm 119:129-136...

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

The well-known Epistle Lesson before us this morning from the eighth chapter of Romans is one that is often heard at funerals. That echo of familiarity enables us to anticipate the comforting words of the text. Listen to these words from Paul's letter to the church in Rome 8:26-39...

Sermon

Our Epistle Lesson this morning does not begin in a church, or a funeral parlor, or at a graveside, but in a courtroom, with people like you and me on trial. The scene is not that of the pulpit and Bible and preacher before people gathered around the body of a loved one. There are no stands of flowers here. This is a criminal court. There's a judge's bench, a prosecutor's table, and a prisoner's dock.

And who stands in custody? We do. The law is now read, God's law:

You shall have no other gods before me, you shall not make any graven images; you shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy; honor your father and mother; you shall not kill, commit adultery, or steal; you shall not bear false witness or covet. (Exodus 20:1-17)

Then this:

Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, "How are we robbing you?" In your tithes and offerings! You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you! (Mal. 3:8-9)

And finally this:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. And, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Luke 10:27)

At these words, the chill of guilt begins to settle upon us. But we muster a defense, weak though it is:

Your honor, I have basically been, all things considered, a decent person. When you look around, there are many less moral than I. Just look at all those dope peddlers and child molesters. Look at those malicious tyrants like Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin. I'm not like them.

But we know our appeals to virtue are thin. And in fact, Paul has already announced the true verdict: "There is no distinction, since all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) At the bar of conscience we know that we have failed. We have offended against God's holy laws. We have done what we should not have done. We have failed to do what we should have done.

Well, it is into this dark gloom of guilt that today's text would shine its healing light. But first, it is time for the charges against us to be placed. "Who shall bring any charge?" Paul asks. Our heads are hanging, waiting for the swift blow of justice; but "who is to condemn?" Paul wonders. The only one who can bring charges is the very God who is seen to be *for* us, and not against us. The prosecuting attorney is none other than Jesus Christ, who died for us, who was raised from the dead on our behalf, and who even now intercedes for us at the right hand of God. Jesus will certainly not prosecute God's own.

To be conscious of our unworthiness is a necessary corrective to spiritual pride, but to be constantly and hopelessly under the gun of our sin is the way to despair. It is

wrong to ignore our spiritual failures, since that leads to unreality; it is also wrong to be obsessed with them, since that leads to inevitable defeat.

Paul points to a method which at once makes us honest with ourselves about sin, but saves us from an unhealthy preoccupation with it. When he says, “It is God who justifies; who is to condemn?” he is showing us how to acknowledge the reality of sin even while we escape from its tyranny. “It is God who justifies; who is to condemn.”

In summation, there is the law, and there is our undeniable guilt before it; but, wondrously, joyously, graciously—there are no charges filed. Our case has been settled “out of court,” and “now there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.” And so the case is dismissed.

Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* ends with Raskolnikov in prison, having confessed to the crime of murder. He finds there under his pillow an almost-forgotten copy of the New Testament, which has been given to him by Sonya, a fellow prisoner. A thought flashes through Raskolnikov’s mind: “Could not her beliefs become my beliefs now?” “But that, writes Dostoevsky, “is the beginning of a new story...”

...the story of the gradual renewal of a man, of his gradual regeneration, of his slow progress from one world to another, of how he learned to know a hitherto undreamed-of reality. All that might be the subject of a new tale, but our present one is ended.

With those words, the novel ends. But with that hope of “a hitherto undreamed-of reality,” the gospel of Jesus Christ begins: “If God is for us, who is against us?”

In his poem “Mending Wall,” Robert Frost says, “Something there is in me that does not like a wall.” Walls tend to separate, like West Germans once were separated from East Germans. Like the separation of young from old, rich from poor, male from female, black from white. Among the things I like about our Senator Tim Scott is that he

tries to break down walls that might separate black from white. The Apostle Paul says that the work of the gospel of Jesus Christ is tearing down walls that separate.

Our scripture from this eighth chapter of Romans is about solidarity and the Christian assurance of salvation. Yet, in the passage Paul lists the panoply of life's risks and realities—things like tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword. If he were writing today, he might list obesity, dementia, addiction, poverty, terrorism, depression, homicide and suicide, the plight of fentanyl users and the tragic loss of human life. Who has not experienced a dark night of the soul? Or asked, "Why me?" Felt abandoned by God? Job did:

Did not I weep for him whose day was hard?
Was not my soul grieved for the poor?
But when I looked for good, evil came;
and when I waited for light,
darkness came. (30:25-26)

One minister who dropped out of the ministry for a while said:

There was a time in my own life, when I just could not cope with the pressures that were coming at me. Things were going badly at home and at work. I even stopped going to church for a while. During all of this time, I never stopped believing in God. But I didn't feel the power of my faith either. I could no longer pray!

What shall we say to this? Can these distresses separate us from God; can they create a wall that cannot be torn down?

Ironically, there is a wall in Washington, D.C., that has become a healing and unifying force for the American people. It's the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. This wall was designed by Maya Ying Lin and was dedicated on November 13, 1982—almost 41 years ago. When I was in Washington in 1988, I went to see this wall. There is a sloping simplicity of the polished black granite surface for which one is unprepared. 58,276 names are incised on the gleaming surface. These are the names of those dead and

missing in the Vietnam War. People use a pencil rubbing to lift off the name of a friend or loved one. An awesome, sad feeling comes over one standing before this wall; many are moved to tears.

One of the most remarkable features of the wall is that it is backed up to and embedded on one side in the earth. There is no separation here. There is only solidarity with the stabilizing ground. The separate names of the individuals are blended into a community of the sacrificed and the suffering. Neither rank nor heroes, the privileged nor the deprived, are singled out. All the names are the same size. The emotional impact of all of this can move even the most stoic. School children, as they begin the gradual descent down the walkway in front of the wall, even they are often stilled and moved by the mystique that the wall creates.

And oddly enough this wall has unified estranged veterans and the American public. The wall has broken down other walls that separated. The Memorial is located in close proximity to the enormous white marble Lincoln Memorial. And this juxtaposition is fortunate. Two wars that have torn our country apart are harmonized, if not explained, by these monuments.

The wall of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial speaks of the same thing as does Paul in our Roman text. We are all estranged, broken. Yet there is a commonality, a unity. Our epistle lesson offers hope and assurance. Our names are there on the surface of divine caring. And the strains of an old familiar hymn come to mind: "O, love that wilt not let me go."

For God's love is not simply a tender grasp of our hand when distress, persecution, powers, and principalities rage. Illness, death, divorce, financial hardship, terrorism, peril, war, and all the rest do not have the final, ultimate word. They are the

last violent thrashing of a world that is passing away before the coming triumph of God's reign, and God's present love is the wind blowing in from his kingdom coming.

In our Psalm today the people are reminded of God's faithfulness to Israel. That God has made a covenant with them. A larger purpose is at work on their behalf and on behalf of others. God will bless them and through them all the families of the earth. In remembering, they are reshaped.

Yes, we still live every day in the old world. We must still make our way to the court room. We must still trudge to the cemetery. We still hear news of suicide bombers and people dying of cancer. We face brokenness in human relationships at every turn. What sign do we have that this is not the destiny of the world, to go out with a whimper, or a scream? Or "as a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." *Only this*: the love of God in Jesus Christ made present to us and our world through the power of the Holy Spirit. If God spared not his only Son, will he let some tribulation separate us from him? If *God* is for us, who can be against us? Be assured, our salvation is secure; it begins and ends with God's love in Jesus Christ.

My friends, the love of God in Jesus Christ is the sure promise of God that history does not finally lead to a concentration camp, or a grave, or a guilty verdict, or a wall of separation, but to Jesus Christ who has settled all that "out of court," in his life, death, and resurrection.