

July 27, 2008

Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost, Year A, Proper 12 (Romans 8:26-39)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

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I once read an article about ways NOT to start a sermon, about phrases that will lose one's listeners long before the sermon gets started. "A funny thing happened to me on the way to church this morning", was one. "Last night as I tossed and turned in bed while trying to figure out just what to say today," was another.

And I will start this sermon with a third such phrase:

"This morning I have a confession to make..."

Did I just lose you? I hope not, but I do want to start with a confession...

You see I am a life-long Episcopalian; some folks like to use the term "cradle Episcopalian." OK, that fits me very well. I like to say that I teathed on the pews in the balcony at St. Luke's, just around the corner from us, and that among the first books I ruined with crayons was a pew addition of the *1928 Book of Common Prayer*. I remember as a child my father teaching me about reverencing the cross in the procession and my grandmother saying that we had a "tradition" of, "You stand to sing and praise, sit to listen and be instructed and kneel to pray." There is a part of that tradition that I miss from time to time, but I value the recovery of many ancient liturgical traditions that enhance and enrich our worship.

I was a very good Episcopalian as a child and youth. Before attending seminary if you had asked me to get my Bible I would have had to go into a box or some other storage space to look for my red-letter King James Version, which was my childhood Bible. From my point of view I had had a good Sunday School experience up until that time, but to be perfectly honest I did not know the Bible at all, an unfortunate reality of most of those in my generation. So here is my confession:

"Before seminary I was biblically illiterate."

There, I have said it.

I also knew little, if anything, about "the Anglican Communion".

So I didn't quite understand why so many of my fellow seminarians were so excited by this "guy" who was coming to the seminary to give a series of lectures on Paul's Epistle to the Romans. The Archbishop of Canterbury, The Most Reverend Donald Coggan, was to be with us for three lectures. Then when I heard that the audience was expected to be too big for any space on the seminary campus, and that we would have to go next door to the gymnasium at Episcopal High School, I figured that this was yet another reason not to attend. "Oh, Chuck, you had better go! Dr. Fuller, (our New Testament professor) will certainly be taking roll," one of my new friends said. After attending the first lecture wild horses could not have kept me from returning for the next two. That day the Archbishop's teachings began a long-standing love affair for me with this epistle.

He began, with his beautiful British accent – one that we all know and love so well, thank you Geoffrey- by saying, “Those of you who brought your Bibles, please open them to the Eighth Chapter of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans. This is where we will begin today. Now, please close your Bibles and just listen.” As he read the words written by Saint Paul long ago came vividly to life. It was clear that the words were a part of the Archbishop’s very being. He seemed to know not only what the words meant, but also how they should feel as they fell upon our ears. After he finished reading he paused and then said, “This is Paul at his best. Our faith can not be better expressed. I am convinced that *nothing* can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Nothing can separate us from the love of God, in Jesus Christ our Lord!

I too, am convinced.

We may sometimes struggle with Paul and his first century, pharisaic perspectives and opinions from time to time. However, Paul redeems himself with passages like this morning’s and the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. And remember – Paul openly admits to his own brokenness, struggles and shortcomings. Here, in this marvelous letter of introduction to the new followers of Christ in Rome, a letter to people he has never met but hopes to meet soon, Paul speaks with great confidence and faith – he is convinced. Paul knows, in his inter-most being and from personal experience, the darkness, travail and despair that can come upon us, and yet he speaks of absolute hope and of assured salvation for all who seek and serve Christ.

Remember that Paul will arrive in Rome not too far in the future, but not as he had planned. He arrives in chains, is imprisoned, and is eventually martyred by the Emperor Nero for the very faith he proclaims this morning.

You and I follow the very same Jesus, keep the very same faith. We say our prayers and work to keep our faith. We struggle with the changes and chances of this life. We make our plans; have our hopes and dreams, our wishes and our desires. We teach our faith to our children, send our young people off on pilgrimages and mission trips in the name of Jesus as we are about to do today. We certainly don’t expect to be arrested and carried off to the authorities in some far off city because of our faith and our ministries to spread the kingdom right here and right now.

But Paul was treated this way. I can only believe that his convictions carried him through hardship, mistreatment and persecution and right into the Kingdom of God. Not only do I believe this – I am **convinced** that Paul points beyond himself – to the Kingdom of God, and to our Savior. Paul has helped me to know Jesus, who is my companion along the way, who saves me now and will stand beside me on my last day.

At the risk of sounding like a broken record let me confess a bit more:

I am so very thankful that God has given me life. I am so very thankful that God has brought me to this place in my life. I am so very thankful to have the opportunity to fulfill my commitment to care for and honor my beloved Susie, hour and hour and day by day, in sickness and in health, for better and for worse. I am so thankful to be here, in this place, with you, this morning and to know that Jesus is among us.

It may be that some of you may be growing tired of my references to Susie's "fall off the mountain", as she refers to it, four months ago. Please stick with me for a bit longer. Anyone who has experienced this kind of event in his or her life knows how drastically it changes everything. And a good therapist has said that speaking about it is healing for me and for us. Those who haven't experienced such trauma, my prayer is that you never will have to do so. But just in case you do, please listen:

I have written some of this in the *Caring Bridge* journal some of you have followed, but I think it's worth repeating today.

I AM CONVINCED that as Susie rolled off the ledge God was with her and would be with her, no matter the outcome. I am convinced that as I ran down the side of the gorge God was with me – I could have easily fallen and been injured myself. I am convinced that God guided me and helped me remember all the first aid skills I have learned but never had to use before.

I AM CONVINCED that God heard and answered my prayers for physical strength to hold Susie from falling any further, sent the power of the Holy Spirit to strengthen me when my physical strength was failing and to help me overcome my great fear of significant bleeding. I am convinced that in the midst of her critical injury and overwhelming pain, God led her to deeply smell the sweet, sweet odor of the precious earth beneath her, to connect her to the creation and to give her comfort. I am convinced that from the time on the hillside, in every moment since, right until this moment, Susie and I, and you, have been held and we be held closely in the loving arms of Jesus Christ, who is our Lord. And I am convinced that once we know this and live out of it, we are empowered to do marvelous things to further the kingdom in this time and this place.

When my father died in 1999, St. Luke's was undergoing a major restoration of its nave. All Saints' extended wonderful and faithful hospitality to those in need of a place for the celebration of new life, be it a wedding or funeral. And so this physical space, and this community of faith, lived out the Gospel in welcoming my family, in faith and in service, as we celebrated my father's life here among us and his entrance into God's Kingdom with all the saints.

There were those in my family who had a bit of a struggle with my not be willing nor wanting to officiate at my father's funeral. I just wanted to be a son, his child, not the pastor. But I did want to do one thing – I wanted to read from the eighth chapter of Romans, and that was the last time I read these words in a liturgy until now. OK, I have made my confession, but more importantly:

"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."

It is my prayer that God convinces you, too.

Amen.