

Here in Chapter 8, one of the most well-known passages in Romans- often heard at funerals- we find the climax of Paul's argument, which he started in Chapter 5, echoing his words on suffering and hope. Paul's concern is more eschatological- focused on the end times- rather than psychological or individual. In particular, it's about the completion of creation, already begun by God through Christ. As I've said before, living in the 21st century in the US as followers of Christ, we don't fully understand what it was like to live in 1st century Rome. Nevertheless, hardships and challenges are relative, and the context in which scripture was written is always important to know. And while it does sound like these verses are meant to be read as an individual's walk of faith, listen for the plural pronouns. The focus is on God's redemption of all God's people, and all of creation with them. This is a much bigger picture and plan than just our individual stories. "Paul writes that God's plan is and has always been the redemption of creation; We will be restored into the image of God in which we were called into being and meant to live" (Chakoian, FOW, p. 283). Here in Romans 8, God is the initiator. God is the subject. God actively accomplishes the redemption of all things in creation through Jesus Christ on the cross. God makes all things work together for good with those who love him" (Chakion, FOW, p. 283). Paul doesn't say we are promised no suffering. What we're promised is God's love that never leaves us. Before turning to God's word for us today, let us pray. **PRAY. READ. Romans 8:26-29, 31-35, & 38-39**

A few years ago I returned again to Guatemala on a mission trip where we visited with some women in "Corazon de Mujer"- "Heart of Women." This

is a group of Mayan women-grandmothers, mothers, daughters, and friends who weave items and sell them in the markets. These women are from different Mayan tribes. They do not live in the house where we gathered, rather, they live in villages that surround the town we visited. When they first began forming this community, most of them did not speak the other's Mayan language nor did most of them know Spanish. However, over the years that they've been together, they've all learned to speak Spanish. When they host groups, such as ours, they come together to cook and eat, to sell their items and to share their stories of living through Guatemala's 36 year Civil War that last from 1960-1996. Over the years I've heard the women share their stories, I've noticed that they share more and more about their suffering- regardless of their fear. While we were there, Bernada was one of two women who shared her story. Bernada told us that it was the early 1980s and she had just had her first child, who was 3 days old. While at home, Bernada and her husband heard yelling and lots of noise coming from outside. They quickly realized that the army was coming to wipe out their entire village, and they ran out of the house and into the forest of the mountains to hide. There was no time to grab anything. Only time to run. With her 3 day old child in her arms, Bernada and her husband ran, fleeing for their lives. Their entire village was trying to escape with them and soon Bernada and her husband got separated from each other. Bernada slipped and fell down a ravine. She was all alone with her baby. She heard some people from her village and joined them. Night was fastly approaching, and the baby was hungry and crying, as newborns do. The people with her told Bernada that she needed to

leave her baby behind. Her baby was a liability. If the army heard the baby, they would come and kill them all. Bernada didn't know what to do. She was hungry, tired and afraid. As tears welled up in her eyes, she told us that at that very moment in the valley of the shadow of death, she felt God's Spirit with her and she knew what she had to do. She gathered her baby in her arms, no more cloth for diapers, no food, and she left the others to try and find safety. A week or so later, Bernada and her husband were united, and their baby survived. They went on to have several other children; however, there were many in Bernada's village who didn't survive and whose bodies have still yet to be identified. Bernada's story was hard to hear and yet, in the midst of her terrible ordeal, she experienced God's presence with her. These were her words. She believes that God gave her the strength to survive step after step with her baby. In the midst of being separated from her husband and fearing for her child's life and her own, she believes that God was with her. I cannot begin to imagine Bernada's story, let alone living through it and coming out with her faith and trust in God.

Sometimes when our stories are too intense, too terrible or what we hear is too much, we can lose sight of God's work and presence among us.

Sometimes we feel alienated, separated, and estranged and it can feel as if everyone and everything is against us. In these times, it can be hard to remember that God is unmistakably for us- that God is our greatest source of love. That's why **Paul's focus in these verses is on the work of God.**

There in the valley of the shadow, there in our suffering- there the Spirit

translates for us with sighs too deep for words. There in the very beginning of creation, God chose us, conformed us to Christ's image, called, justified, and glorified us. God is the owner of these verbs. God conforms. God calls. God justifies. God glorifies. "These verbs communicate what God has already accomplished. If we cannot see their completion yet, we can trust in God's sovereign rule" (Chakoian, FOW, p. 283). Through Christ's death, all of creation is redeemed and through his resurrection, death no longer has the final word. God is for and with us, even in the midst of our trial and exile. God is on the loose and at work in the world. Sometimes though when we're in the valley...we don't always experience God in the moment like Bernada did but that doesn't mean that God isn't for us and with us. "The first eleven chapters of Romans work out one of the central hallmarks of the kingdom of God, that in God's family "there is no distinction" between people (Romans 3.22b). Class, race, sexual orientation, wealth, fame, gender, religion, marriage, political party — none of these categories by which we carve up humanity into various tribes counts for or against a person in the kingdom. Here Paul is speaking to anyone who has been told that their identity precludes them from God's promises. Our union with Christ has given us a new identity, for we are a new creation. Central to this identity is that 'God is for us.' Paul then asks, 'If God is for us, who is against us?'" (Fitzpatrick). We read in the Gospel of John that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. God sent his Son to save the world, and we are a part of the world, as is all of creation. Jesus intercedes for us. We also read in scripture that we're adopted into the family of God.

We are God's children and belong to God. We are heirs of Christ. Nothing in all creation can defeat the redemptive purpose of God for all God's children. Nothing.

I don't speak much Spanish but every time I travel to Guatemala, I try little by little to learn some new words. One of my favorite Spanish words is "nada." It simply means "nothing." It's short and to the point. Sometimes I find that when I learn a word in another language, I don't take the English words as much for granted. When I hear "nothing," I don't pay as much attention as when I hear "nada." Maybe it's just me, but I need words with meaning that stick to me, stick in my head, stick to my soul. Nada? Nada! I didn't even notice until writing today's sermon and lifting her up in prayer that Bernada's name has the reminder of nothing in it. Even when we're in the midst...especially when we're in the midst of the laundry list of suffering, nothing -NADA- separates us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord. This is the joyful news that Paul is telling the people in the 1st century and in every century since, including us now! Paul seems to name "every evil that he can think of that consumes and destroys human life, asking whether *any* of it can have final victory over those whose citizenship is in the kingdom of God" (journeywithjesus.org, Michael Fitzpatrick). Not "hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not scripture taken out of context or bad theology, not in times of transitions, not backstabbing or betrayal, not even the worst sins listed in scripture- not even death- nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable" (The Message)- absolutely nothing-

NADA- in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. NADA! The Good News of God's kingdom is that with Christ as Lord of our lives, nothing this life throws at us nor anything we do- NADA- can ever sever God's love- not COVID, nor a future climate catastrophe, not systemic racism nor religious genocide, not wildfire nor cancer — no, nothing- NADA- in the highest heights or the lowest depths of this cosmos, or elsewhere in the whole of creation, has the power to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Fitzpatrick).

There's a legendary story that I love about Swiss Theologian Karl Barth, who lived in the 19th and part of the 20th centuries. Barth, who wrote the four volumes of "The Church Dogmatics," as well as many other theological works and doctrines, was visiting the US in 1962. He was teaching at the University of Chicago in Rockefeller Chapel and during the Q & A session, a student asked Barth (I'm wondering if it was somewhat sarcastically) to summarize his whole life's work in theology into one sentence. Barth replied something along the lines of, "Yes, I can. In the words of a song I learned at my mother's knee: 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.'" When we strip away everything else, there in that one sentence is the heart of the gospel! God's all-conquering love will always be with us. This is the hope that we, as followers of Christ, proclaim, especially in the midst of suffering. Nada? Nada! NOTHING in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. NADA! Thanks be to God! Amen.