

At the Right Hand of the Father

Romans 8:31-39

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Today we conclude our January sermon series on salvation by exploring what one of those phrases that we say almost every week in the Apostle's Creed really means for our life and our life of faith. Last week, Katelyn reflected on what it means for our salvation when we say that Jesus "descended into hell." Today we will focus on what it means for us to say that Jesus is "seated at the right hand of the Father."

The place the Apostle's Creed gets that language is from the Scripture, of course, and one of those Scriptures where we find this language is from the eighth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. Listen with me for the word of God. I will begin reading from the 31st verse...

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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.

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Are you convinced?

I would venture that of the many times I have read this section of Romans, about 95% have been in the context of a memorial service.

This is a wonderful and powerful piece of Scripture. In it there is comfort...but also an edge of defiance. That's a main reason why this is such a powerful word to read in the wake of a person's death: it speaks to the resurrection promise that is at the heart of our faith...a promise that renders all the powers of this world powerless.

So whether a person died of cancer, or violence; or if a person's life was filled with mental illness or addiction; or if their closest relationships were broken...whatever the circumstance or the hardship – Paul gives us words to lay all those powers bare.

Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Of that we are convinced.

When I read this Scripture at a memorial service, I have, literally, seen it comfort and strengthen the family of the one who has died. And it's the same for me.

But the apostle Paul didn't write this Scripture to be a funeral liturgy. He wrote it to build up people who were trying to follow in the footsteps of Jesus – and were attempting to do so by living out their faith in the real world. So the question for today is how convinced are we of this truth that Paul speaks when our focus is on the life ahead of us, instead of only when we are grieving someone whose life is behind?

Everyone in this room – and everyone who is worshipping with us by way of the television or on the internet – faces choices about the life that is ahead of us. For some, the life we have left grows short. For others, there are multiple seasons in store. But all of us have some living left to do. In that time we have yet to live – how convinced are we that nothing will separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord?

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Last week in her sermon, Katelyn made the point that outside of us saying the Apostle's Creed, we don't hear the word hell too often when we gather together at church (with the notable exception of Sundays when Katelyn preaches about hell).

As I have reflected on Katelyn's sermon, I realize that we don't hear the word heaven too much, either.

And the reason, harnessing my inner John Calvin, we don't dwell on heaven is because we don't spend time worrying about whether we will earn our way.

If you've ever admitted to being a Presbyterian in mixed company, you've probably been asked whether you believe in "predestination." I'd love to hear how you answered that question, by the way...

Many people, when they hear the name John Calvin or Presbyterian think about predestination. Predestination holds that God, and God alone, knows the answers to our questions about salvation; and that nothing that we do or don't do can effect what God chooses.

The doctrine of Predestination is a vastly misunderstood part of what we believe – but the reason that Calvin lifted up this very old idea (he didn't invent it, by the way) – was to help those of us who commit our lives to following Jesus stop spending our time worrying about whether or not we will be going to heaven when our life on this earth was through.

Predestination is intended to free us **from** anxiety and to free us **for** living in the confidence that our salvation is sure.

Or, another way to put it might be, the reason we don't spend a whole lot of time talking about our worrying about heaven is because **we are convinced** that nothing in life or in death will be able to separate us from the love of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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When we stand and say "he ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of the Father, from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead" we are doing more than reciting something that we are supposed to believe. What we are really doing is reminding ourselves that the only one who is in a position to judge us is the very one who came to save us. And if we trust that, then it helps to give us confidence for the life that God gives us to lead.

13 years ago I was just starting out in ministry – I was recently credentialed with a masters degree, recently married, and trying to figure out how to afford being a real-life adult. I had a lot of energy, but not a lot of experience. I had a lot of ideas, but not a lot of confidence.

I was living in a world where everything seemed new and overwhelming – and, as a new pastor, I was working in a profession where everyone seemed better prepared and more certain of their beliefs than I did at the time.

So in order to channel some of my nervous energy, I decided that I would set my mind on a goal outside of work, and I began training for a marathon.

My first step was to find the flattest marathon course in the United States of America. A friend and I settled on Kiawah, off the coast of Charleston – with an elevation change that measured in inches instead of in feet. The months of training ahead of the marathon were good for me – and when the day of the race arrived, I felt ready.

The Kiawah Marathon is run on one, 13-mile loop. Now, intellectually, I knew that to run the full marathon you had to run that loop twice. But when I crossed the 12-mile marker of the course, what seemed obvious at the start of the race began to feel optional.

Most of the people who were running with me that day had entered the half-marathon. As I approached mile marker 13 I watched (jealousy doesn't quite capture it) as those sane, half-marathoners took a left and began to sprint toward the finish line.

Instead of a left, I had committed to take a right.
And my golly – was that a hard decision!

To run in the direction of mile marker 1/14 and 7/20. And, frankly, after that my legs hurt so badly that I blocked the last 6.2 miles from memory. I've been told I finished the race. I even beat Puff Daddy and Oprah Winfrey.

But the memory I have of that day isn't the finish line; it is the choice I faced in the middle of the race.

There's a reason Paul, and other writers in the Bible use running as a metaphor for the life of faith.

It is because life takes endurance.

Because at some point, if not much of the time, life is hard.

[I saw a funny meme on Facebook this week that I shared. It was one of those blue ribbons you would get at a swim meet or a science fair. This one read: Adulthood: Honorable Mention. Some days are like that.]

Sometimes it is hard enough just getting through the week.

With work – or school.

Carpool – or chores.

Decisions about kids – or your aging parents.

Anxieties about money – and not losing yourself in the pursuit of it.

That's enough. But for many others in our community, there are different challenges.

Last Wednesday we hosted Charlotte Detective Gary McFaydden and a man named Shaun Corbett who shared with us the story of an organization they helped found

called “Cops and Barbers.” Cops and Barbers is designed to put the African-American community in touch with the police in safe environment where both groups feel heard; to bring the real pain and justified complaints about racial profiling into conversation with police officers who have the real responsibility to maintain order and a genuine desire to build up communities. Gary and Shuan have made headlines for their effort, and have visited the White House to share their story.

Life is hard enough – but for most of us, we don’t have the added burden of training our children about how to act if they get detained by a police officer because of their appearance.

And, for most of us, we don’t have the added burden of being zoned for a school that is overcrowded and underperforming.

And, for most of us, we don’t fall in an income bracket that makes it all but impossible for us to give our kids a chance to succeed with a good education and meaningful employment.

Life can be hard enough with any one of these struggles – and overwhelming with all of them.

And then to add the worry about whether God loves us enough to save?

To worry that our life will be evaluated by the collective measure of our decisions?

If that sounds like too much – it is.

So here is the good news: Our salvation in Jesus Christ is not another one of those things about which we have to worry.

Rather, the knowledge that we are saved is an invitation for us to be courageous.

Because we know “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” – we can choose to press on and face each day, each choice, each challenge with the knowledge that what might feel overwhelming to us will not overwhelm the God to whom we belong.

Because our lives are connected to the one who sits at the right hand of the Father, we are invited to be bold and even risky as we think about how we should love our neighbors whose lives are just as connected.

Of that I am convinced.

And I recognize that you might not be.

And that’s okay.

Because even your doubt cannot get in the way of the good news of your salvation.

Isn't that amazing?

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