

God's Greater Story – God, In love, Ruling Over Ruins

8th Sun. after Pent. – 7/26/20 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Romans 8:38-39 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 37, [Paul answers all arguments and reasons that seek to shoot down the value of faith in Christ and says,] **“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.”**

Introduction

- ✘ If you go to Coventry Cathedral in England and stand before the altar, you will be overwhelmed by the bright green tapestry that rises above you. We've placed a picture of this tapestry inside the front of our bulletin today (and at the front of the home worship materials if you're listening to this online). Sadly the black and white picture in our bulletin does not do justice to the real piece of art.
 - ➔ This tapestry depicts Christ enthroned in glory; a pale and wounded Christ, but still seated on His throne. And in each corner is a symbol of one of the evangelists; Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; the ones who give us one vision of the wounded Christ ruling over the fallen world.
 - ➔ The sheer size of the tapestry makes it overwhelming. It's about the size of a tennis court, hanging in the air. It took 12 weavers 3 years to complete. And yet this woven picture of Christ, enthroned in glory, hanging above the altar, overwhelms in another way. It overwhelms us with God's love.
- ✘ What the designer, Graham Sutherland did here with thread is what the apostle Paul does with words in his letter to the Christian community struggling in Rome.
 - ➔ The passage we consider this morning is one of the most beautiful passages of Paul in Romans; as he has woven together all of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – with all of creation – death and life, angels and demons, present and future, things seen and unseen into one tapestry of God's rule and reign in this universe.
 - ➔ Yes, Paul wants you and me to know all of God's love as He rules over all of creation. So he takes us to the end of the story of God, which is really not an ending at all but a new beginning; a glorious re-creation of all things and the final victorious revelation of who God's people really are. We are “more than conquerors” in His love.
- ✘ That's the message this week as we continue our series of sermons called *God's Greater Story* based upon the readings in Romans.
 - ➔ When we read the words of Paul this week something interesting happens. It is not as if we are standing there, at the foot of this tapestry, looking up at an overwhelming figure. No, it is as if Paul has invited us up and into the tapestry with Christ so that we can see what Christ sees from His throne. You see, Paul knows that when we see the world through the eyes of Christ our lives will be changed.
 - ➔ I say this because when we come to church, too often we come with a limited vision of God. It's only natural that we look at God through the experience of our own lives. But that limits what we see. Did God answer my prayers this week? Did He give me strength to deal with work; to handle the kids or the stresses of a worldwide pandemic?
 - ➔ Thinking this way can make God small; small enough for us to fit Him into our lives...once a week...only on Sunday or only those times that we're around other believers.
- ✘ But Paul wants to change our perspective. He wants us to experience a reversal in thinking. You see, we don't fit God into our lives, but God brings us into His life; into His love; into His rule of the world.

I. The Ruins of This World:

- ⌘ So Paul shows us how we need to see the world through the eyes of Jesus, risen from the dead and ruling in love; ruling even over the ruins of this world. Yes, God in love is ruling over ruins.
 - ➔ Paul even gives us a list of some of the most common ruins that people fear might separate us from God. They are both outside of, and within us: tribulation, distress, and persecution; famine and nakedness; danger and sword. And these are not just words folks, these are realities that Paul has seen in his own ministry.
 - ➔ At the time he writes these words, he is actually journeying to Jerusalem; carrying a gift for the poor who are suffering under famine. Paul has been in prison. He has suffered tribulation and danger. He knows how the world fights against God's people. Those are evils outside of the Christian.
 - ➔ The evils within us Christians are well known by Paul as well. He stood there as Stephen was stoned and approved of his execution without remorse. He knows of sin and Satan's torments that make us do the things we do not want to do and leave the things we want to do for Christ undone (Rom. 7). This is why Paul could say that he was himself "the foremost" (1 Tim. 1:15-16) of sinners.
- ⌘ Yet in this section of his letter, Paul invites us to bring it all before God – the evil that stands outside of you like the loss of a job; the death of a child; the tragedies you know you will never get over, and also he asks us to be honest about the evil within us, because we stand before God, suffering not only from a world in ruins; but suffering from our own sins as well. Sins for example that reveal our part in broken and strained relationships; sins of greed that keep us from being generous with those in need; sins that lead us to cower back in fear so that we keep our faith only to ourselves and those with whom we deem to be "safe".
- ⌘ Paul asks us to gather all of these up and place them before God's throne in humble repentance; knowing there is not enough time to confess it all and no bag big enough to hold all of the evil and suffering of which we are intimately a part.

II. God Ruling in Love:

- ⌘ And as we bring it all before God, Paul assures us that God in Christ responds to us in His unmeasured love. This is Paul's great insight; that God rules over the ruins of this world, not in vengeance or anger, but in love.
- ⌘ If you were to go to Coventry Cathedral and turn away from the tapestry toward the church, what you would see would utterly amaze you. It's the same view that Jesus in the tapestry sees – a church in ruins!
 - ➔ You see, Coventry Cathedral is a church built upon ruins. On November 14, 1940, the city of Coventry was bombed in the blitzkrieg; that is the nighttime horror of Hitler's Luftwaffe in World War II. In one night, this place where people had worshipped for almost 900 years, was reduced to charred wood and ruined stones rising from the earth in columns of smoke. What remains today is revealed in the second picture next to the tapestry in our bulletin.
- ⌘ A stonemason at the time, Jock Forbes, looked over the ruins and saw two medieval timbers, charred from the fire; fallen to the ground in the shape of a cross. So they took those timbers and placed them, as a cross, on top of a pile of rubble, making an altar before a wall of shattered stones. And behind them, they placed the words, "Father forgive".
 - ➔ Then, a new cathedral was built extending off from the old ruins. The huge tapestry hangs at the altar of the new cathedral so that Jesus sits enthroned, facing the ruins of a fallen world. In

front of Him, are the seats where people gather while the ruins of the old cathedral still remain behind the people.

→ Separating the people and the ruins is a wall of glass. On it are etched images of angels and saints; figures from the Old Testament, from the New Testament, from the martyrs of the past and the present.

✘ This portrays how Jesus, enthroned in glory, looks out over a fallen world today, always with a vision of hope. He sees the angels and archangels and all the host of heaven. He sees the saints and the prophets, the apostles and martyrs; the ways in which His church has triumphed in the midst of suffering. And as if He were looking through a pane of glass; in the midst of the ruins, there still remains the charred remnants of a cross; the place where God's love was made visible for all to see.

→ Yes as Christ sees you, living in this world among wars and rumors of wars; as victims of suffering, He also sees the times that you have been the instigator of evil toward others. To this our world tells us that all is lost; to just give up, clear away the ruins and forget about God; forget about His suffering; just write off sin as a myth, and go on. Many people actually try to do that.

→ Yet, Paul invites you to stay; to stand in the midst of it all; to stand before God, with your sin and suffering laid bare.

✘ Why would Paul ask you to do this? Because he knows the One who rules over all – Jesus. He knows that this Jesus has given His all for you.

→ At the heart of all the suffering and sin is that charred cross; that moment when Jesus offered His sinless life for our sinful flesh. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus conquered the powers of sin and hell and death and claimed us to be His own; claimed us to share in His victory 100%.

→ Listen to Paul in verses 33-34, "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn?" Paul picks up and expands here on what he said earlier in chapter 3:23-24, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus".

✘ As the cathedral was expanded out of ruins, so God's love builds and expands throughout our entire life. Paul writes, "for those whom He foreknew, He also predestined...and those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called, He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified" (vv. 29-30).

→ Paul wants us to see not only the breadth but also the height and depth of God's love for us. Not only has Christ died and risen for us; not only does Christ hold our entire life in His hand, but Christ also rules over all of creation today in love so that Paul can sing a never-ending song.

→ God's love for you is all-inclusive folks: verse 28, "all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose". There is not one shred of doubt; not the slightest question in Paul's thinking. "I am sure," he says in verses 38-39, "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."

III. We live before God in hope:

✘ Paul knows that we are immersed, daily in a ruined creation, but he urges us to lift our eyes and see this vision of Christ enthroned in glory. For it is a vision that gives us hope today.

→ And this world makes hope a hard thing to live in. It would have been easy for the people of Coventry Chapel, after the bombing, to either look at the ruins in despair and walk away or just

clean up the ruins, erase the memory and build a new church so no one would even know the difference.

→ But to do either of those would be to let the destruction triumph and deny hope or to let the future just deny the very real suffering in this world. What they did instead was to hold both the suffering and the glory together in a unified vision of hope. This teaches and reminds us friends that in the midst of this fallen creation God continues to rule in love, and His rule gives us hope; hope at a time that we too can be led to just give up in despair or turn our backs on the really suffering that exists.

✘ So we Christians; when we suffer in this world; when we see the ruins of sin and evil, we do not give up hope. We do not deny the suffering or the evil and we do not let go of the hope that we have in Jesus.

→ The closer a person comes to the tapestry, the harder it is to see Christ, high above, ruling over all. What you see instead is what the artist placed at the very bottom of the tapestry – a depiction of Christ on the cross. So when people go to the altar at the base of the tapestry to receive the body and blood of Christ, they experience both the reality of suffering, Christ's suffering for us, and the reality of hope, God's majestic rule in the victory of Christ.

✘ The closer those outside the church get to us who are in the church what do they see? They see people who are suffering, much as they do. We Christians experience cancer, mental disorders, depression, death and more just as unbelievers do.

→ Yet in the midst of suffering and sin, Paul says in verse 37, "In all these things we are more than conquerors ('hyper-victors') through Him who loved us." Why? Because we know that Christ's victory over sin and death and Satan is our victory! Because He went to the cross and conquered all evil, not for Himself, but for us! Yes He rules over the ruins of our souls in His unfathomable love.

Conclusion

✘ And this love of Christ continues with and for us today and into eternity. Paul reminds us in verse 34, "Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is (present tense) at the right hand of God, who indeed is (present tense) interceding for us."

→ In the tapestry we see Jesus, sitting with both hands raised upward in prayer. He is praying to the Father for you! As you make your way home today and enter into a new week, Jesus continues to pray for you. Jesus takes your suffering and burdens; your sins and sorrows, and presents them in prayer to His Father.

→ And because He counts you and me in His victory, we are confident that the Father, in love, not only hears and knows of our suffering and need, but He who has justified us (v. 33) in Christ, includes us in His very presence with Jesus even now before we arrive in person before His throne of grace in heaven. For nothing; nothing in this world or the next can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.