

Predestination to the Image of Christ

Matthew 13:44-52

Romans 8:26-39

Today I preach on predestination. Then I plan to leave for a couple of weeks' vacation. Coincidence? I think not! Actually, predestination is not the primary point of today's passage—or of this sermon. But that word, predestination, stands out from the background noise, like your name when someone speaks it across a crowded room. We must deal with it in order to get past it. Romans 8 is the culmination of a complex, important argument the Apostle Paul has been making for six chapters. It has something greater, something more encouraging than predestination to say to us today. With soaring rhetoric Paul reaches his ultimate point with, "For I am sure that... (nothing) in all creation can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Many of us have never needed to hear that more than we do right now.

God's love sticks to us. That is the final word on a passage that references predestination. But wait, many people think, doesn't predestination mean that God does *not* love some people? Does it not mean that God arbitrarily saves some and condemns others to eternity in Hell? The one word answer to both questions is, No. Let us define predestination and apply it to Paul's train of thought in Romans 8. He writes, "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose." The key phrase, often overlooked, is "those who

love (God).” Our Reformed Tradition has long held that our relationship with God springs from a mutual choosing. We choose whether to love God. God chooses to offer that choice to us. God does not close the gateway to salvation. Individual people choose whether to pass through it of their own free will. From all of which it follows that we need to make a deliberate choice to do our best to love God.

Of course, God “foreknew” who will choose to love God. God knows everything. Christian writer Tony Campolo wrote, “God inhabits all of time, all of the time.” Naturally God knows who will make the choice to love Jesus Christ. But even this is not the true meaning of predestination. Romans 8:29: “For those whom (God) foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son...” Predestination is not about God choosing to give some, but not others, a get out of jail free card. Predestination is about becoming more and more like Jesus. When we choose to love God we embark on the journey of becoming more like God.

Instead of getting hung up on the 450 year-old debate over whether God arbitrarily condemns some to hell, we need to focus on the opportunity God has given us. When we respond to God's grace with love for God, God's love leads God to help us become more holy. Another favorite Christian writer, Fredrick Buechner, wrote, “Rather than being holier than thou, Christians would do well just to try to become a bit more holy, day by day.” Well, here is our chance. God has set it up. Choose to respond to God's grace with love. When we do, nothing can separate us from God's love which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. God's love sticks to us.

I am grateful to Scott Racop for volunteering to live-stream our worship services. With the able help of Alan Harder, we hope that today he has finally solved the set of technical issues that made it hard to hear the liturgist and myself on Facebook Live. I might be more grateful for another significant effort Scott has been making for some months: leading the Bible Study and Brew. Picking up on an idea that came out in a meeting of the Strategic Planning Task Force, Scott decided to try leading a bible study in a brewpub. That plan, like all others, had to change once the virus hit Vigo County. And so we have conducted Bible Study and Brew virtually. We start by checking in with each other, study, and spend a fair amount of time just visiting at the end. I must say it has become a favorite ritual for me.

Scott has been using a study guide that covers the parables of Jesus. We just read three of them, ones we have covered in Bible Study and Brew. Each pictures the kingdom of heaven. The first speaks of a man who plows up “treasure” in a field owned by another. He covers it, goes and sells “all that he has”, and buys that field. The second speaks of a man who knows his pearls. When he finds one of “great value”, he follows the same pattern. The kingdom of heaven, Jesus teaches, has supreme value. But the third parable adds a twist: fishermen sorting the catch. The net brings up “fish of every kind”. The sorters keep the good and throw away the bad. Just so, Jesus teaches, “at the close of the age” angels will separate the righteous from the unrighteous. He implies a good outcome for the righteous; he explicitly prophesies the unrighteous will go to hell.

“But wait,” we might be forgiven for thinking, “does that not contradict what the preacher just claimed Romans 8 tells us?” By now you should anticipate the answer: no, it does not. We choose whether to be a catch worthy of keeping. We choose whether to accept the gift of faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. We choose what kind of fish to be and God sorts accordingly. God's love sticks to us. Do we stick to it?

Many, many senior married couples living in separate sections of long-term care facilities have not seen each other for four months. We have at least one couple in this church who fit this description. Because their specific care needs put them on different floors, the COVID-19 policies adopted by their facility has kept them apart. A woman named Terri Doyle captured the moment when this changed for her grandparents. Living in a state whose governor has relaxed the guidelines, their facility allowed them to reunite.

You can find a video of the moment online. Search for Jack and Elsie reunited. The clip opens with Elsie lying listlessly on her bed. An orderly wheels in a man in a wheelchair slumped to one side. She sees him. “Jack!” she cries, “Oh, my Jack!” He does not appear to react. She says, “It's Elsie!” Gently she reaches out to cradle his chin with her hand. She lifts his head. We see that he is smiling, just a little, and tears run down his cheek. They have been married 58 years and until this March the longest they had been apart was less than 24 hours. But even in these trying times their love has not waned. We are children of God, made in the image of God. God loves us. As we become conformed to the image of God in Christ Jesus we can love

with greater power and purity. Our love can stick, too.

You want to talk about love? God “did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us...” God came to earth in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, born to die, born as the Christmas carol puts it, “to give us second birth.” In Paul's words: “...Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who intercedes for us.” He died, but he had a second birth of his own, rising from the dead. Now he sits in the seat of highest honor and pleads our case for us. He advocates for us. He loves us so much he in effect becomes our defense attorney, working to get the jury of one—God—to declare us not guilty of sinning.

Every honest person must cop a plea. We must admit our guilt. We are sinners. I could give you examples from my own life but I would prefer to keep my job. I expect you could say the same. Which makes Paul's claim that *nothing* separates us from the love of God all the sweeter: “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loves us.” “These things” refers to God's action to overcome everything that goes wrong. What goes wrong includes our sins and the sins of others that threaten to detach us from God. Yet God's love sticks to us.

And so our calling becomes loving God and others without qualification. A photograph from 1967 comes to mind. Taken during a protest against the Vietnam War, it shows a man putting a carnation into the end of the barrel of a rifle. The gun belongs to a member of the 503rd Military Police battalion, a unit of the U.S. Army. He

and his fellow soldiers are preventing protesters from reaching the Pentagon. This protester responds by giving him a flower. I have no idea whether he loved the soldier. Perhaps he could not tell us himself. I can tell you his action made one of the slogans of the sixties real: Make love, not war.

We as a nation have survived political and social upheavals even worse than what 2020 has brought us. But we have never, not once, had to face such challenges while at the same time trying to beat back a global pandemic. Which makes it all the more necessary that we come back, again and again, to the glorious conclusion of Romans 8: "For I am certain that nothing in all creation...can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus." Rest in that. **Wallow** in that. Trust the promise. Build your life and your ministry on it. God loved us so much he sent his Son to die for us on the cross. That son rose from the dead to show forth God's authority over death itself. We can reflect a dim version of God's love onto a world desperately in need of it. We must do so.

God's love sticks to us. Praise God. Go out there and make it stick to others. This is why we were created. This is why we were predestined to become more conformed to the image of Christ. This is why we "do" church. As we look around and see children of God hating each other, fighting each other, stand as a beacon of light. Receive the gift of love, of unconditional acceptance of others regardless of skin or political color. Give that gift. God's love sticks to us. Take some of that infinite love and make it stick to others.