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St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington
18 February 2024

Sermon on Romans 8:28-39

Worship Theme:

RETHINKING RELIGION: TRIALS, TESTS, AND TEMPATIONS

“If God loves us, why doesn't he remove all the trials and tests and temptations that we face?” We often make the false assumption that those things are bad. But trials, tests, and temptations are not exceptions to God's love; they are examples of God's love! God allowed his beloved Son Jesus to face trials and temptations, so that he might be our perfect Savior and substitute.

Sermon Theme: “If God”

“If God himself be for me, I may a host defy; for when I pray, before me my foes, confounded, fly. If Christ, my head and master, befriend me from above, what foe or what disaster can drive me from his love?” (CW'21 #819 st. 1) Of course the hymn says that because it's based on Romans 8 which says, “*If God is for us, who can be against us?*” (vs. 31) But what if he weren't? We confidently read Romans 8 and we loudly sang hymn 819, but what if we couldn't? What **if God** were NOT for us?

Sometimes it sure feels that way, doesn't it? As we face trials and tests and temptations throughout life, it feels as if God has turned against us. A growing number of people in our world today don't think it would make much difference if he did. Or worse yet, they think it would be an improvement! Finally let people make their own choices, deciding what's best for themselves and doing whatever feels right in the moment. More and more people say we should be allowed to do what we want whenever we want, deciding for ourselves if it's a good thing or not. And God (if there even IS a God) can mind his own business.

But what if that were real life? What if God actually abandoned us and no longer did what he said he would in his Word? When God created the heavens and the earth, he made the world with order and design. He didn't create a place of chaos and disorder, a place where “anything goes” and “everything is acceptable.” From the very beginning, God made a perfect world with perfect people to live in it and gave them an opportunity to praise and worship him by not eating from the one tree he told them to avoid. If only they had listened! Then life might not be the struggle it so often is, a daily grind filled with pain and suffering and trials and tests and temptations, until all we want is to make it to the end of the day so we can fall asleep praying that tomorrow might be better.

If life is horrible like that because sin messed everything up, does God not have the power he did? God once spoke light into existence and breathed air into a pile of dust to make a living human being – does that God no longer have that power? If he did, would our lives look like THIS? So much pain and loss. So many trials and tests and temptations. Sin reigning so powerfully in the hearts and lives of people. Unbelievers seem to thrive while the people of God waste away.

The more we compare these things to the way we think our Christian lives should be, “***If God is for us***” becomes a pretty big “if.” We begin to doubt that God is able to do anything for us anymore, because time after time he hasn’t done what we asked, no matter how long and hard we prayed for it. So we wonder if God actually IS for us, or if this is just something that was true for a handful of people who lived a long time ago and now only exist on the pages of an old book.

Perhaps we dare to think such reckless thoughts because we’ve never actually considered what it would be like if God were no longer on our side. First and foremost, we would be trapped in sin for every moment of this life and every moment of eternity, because humanity does not possess the power or ability to be free from sin. We know all too well what it’s like, because even with God in our lives, sin still troubles us as long as we live on earth. But if God is no longer for us, sin never ends. Then we wouldn’t be gathered in a place like this one, hearing the Word of the Lord, observing a season called “Lent”, or learning about a God who became man to overcome every trial, test, and temptation for us and in our place. We would never waste our time like this. Truthfully, that wouldn’t have much effect on God – he is holy and is not bound by sin and certainly doesn’t need anything from us. But we would be completely devastated. Then hell wouldn’t be just an unhappy thought or a bad dream; it would be the only future we have.

This isn’t just about eternity though; it matters here and now too! If God were not on our side and separated himself from everything, our world would immediately stop working. Nothing would remain together or function as designed, and there would be nothing to work for or receive because all blessings would be withheld. Nothing in creation can function if the Lord does not direct it. So if we think our lives are difficult now (we complain about them a lot!), then we clearly have no idea how bad the alternative is. **If God** is not for us, then God is against us. The only place that leads is a creation that falls apart, a life apart from any blessing or goodness of God, and a guaranteed future of eternity in hell. THAT’S the existence we get **If God** is against us.

It makes us stop and think, doesn’t it? All the times we’ve doubted God’s goodness and care, questioned if he actually loves us, and wondered, “How could God allow this to happen to me?!” It doesn’t matter how young or old we are, we all question what God is doing and we all doubt whether God is even able to care for us at all. In those moments, we need to look again. Look again into the determined face of the Jesus who entered the human story as a human being and resolutely walked our path, even out into the middle of nowhere to go head-to-head with the devil himself. Look again at the promises of the God who wrote a new story for us in his Word. See the God who has worked in human hearts throughout history to forgive our imperfect past and to give us a perfect future. See the God who takes all the “bad” and uses it for eternal good – a God who is FOR us!

The Apostle Paul wrote it as a question: *If God is for us, who can be against us?* If Scripture said nothing else about this, that might be a pretty big “if”. But God does say more, filling his Word with promises of mercy and peace and reassurances of his Almighty power at work in our lives. He went all the way to

show us how great his love for us is, willingly choosing to personally be our Savior from sin. He takes all the uncertainty away from the “if” and makes it a clear statement of confidence and faith: GOD IS FOR US! Even if we combined every single made-up superhero, all their powers put together would be like the strength of a little ant compared to God. The one who fights for us is the one who made everything. That much power is something we can never comprehend, and he uses every bit of that power for our good, destroying our spiritual enemies, providing for our needs, and guaranteeing our eternal dwelling with him.

That makes Romans 8 one of the most comforting sections in all God’s holy Word. Because it shows us how the God of all Creation is a God of mercy who does not condemn as we deserve, but rather loves and rescues and saves. We don’t have nearly enough time to sufficiently explore the magnitude of everything stated in Romans 8 – we could spend our entire lives marveling at this and we still would have hardly cracked the surface. Thankfully, in heaven we’ll have the endless time for this, but for now we’ll take the time we do have to see the amazing comfort and power of the God who is for us.

As we bask in the amazing grace of God, his Word takes the doubt of our hearts and overcomes it by strengthening our faith and confidence in him. Then our struggles in life aren’t as powerful and intimidating anymore, because no matter what they are, they cannot change the truths of the eternal God. It doesn’t matter if we think or feel something different; if God has spoken, what he says is the truth. And the profoundly beautiful truth our God declares is this:

In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. God has called us to be his dearly-loved people. It isn’t as if we need to love God enough before he’ll be good to us. Clearly, *we love because he first loved us.* (1 John 4) God works for the good of those whom he loved first, long before we had any desire to love him! And as if that love weren’t enough, he also promises to work eternal good from whatever we face in life. Even when it doesn’t seem possible that something good could come out of whatever it is, the God of unlimited power is able to turn a struggle into a blessing, especially when seen from his eternal perspective.

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. There are a lot of big words in there, but we can’t pass them by. There is way too much comfort and love here. God knew us before the beginning. If we try to comprehend even just that point, our heads begin to spin! Before the very first word of Creation rang out, God had already chosen the time in history when he would work in our hearts and lives to bring us into his holy family, not because we were so awesome, but because of how great his gracious love is. So he chose us in eternity, called us to be his children and heirs of his kingdom, stood us before the eternal court, handed us the completely-obedient record of Jesus, and definitively declared us perfect forever. That’s not a God who is unable to solve our problems or take care of us in life; that’s a God whose power is impossibly

unmatched and is every bit at work guiding us through life, calming our troubled souls, strengthening us with his Word, and bringing us one step closer every day to our heavenly home. In times of trouble, trial, testing, temptation, and any other hardship, the Lord keeps our faith-eyes focused on him, trusting that he will use even these things to strengthen us and to bring us closer to him.

*What, then, shall we say in response to these things? **If God** is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? I don't care if this is the millionth time you've heard these verses, please don't let this slip past you unnoticed. God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up. Jesus endured everything the devil could think of – his worst trials, tests, and temptations – and Jesus won. And he didn't stop there. When a sacrifice for sin needed to be made, God the Father willingly chose to give up his Son. God's choice was between Jesus and you, and God chose to save you. The God who makes a choice like that does not abandon us later. He is for us, fighting for us and safely wrapping us up in his unending love. If he willingly gave up his Son for us, he will certainly also provide for our needs until the time he has chosen to bring us home to him.*

On that day, who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Because of the cross of Jesus Christ, we have nothing to fear – our sins are forgiven, not a single blemish remains on your record or mine, and our eternity is certain. In fact, no one has anything at all to say against us because there is nothing to condemn! Jesus took it all away and saved us!

*So **if God** would do all that for us – and he has! – then we have no reason to doubt his love and his care for us. No matter what our lives look like, no matter how many trials, tests, and temptations we face each day, our eternity is secure in Jesus and our every-day-until-then is secure in Jesus too. So boldly cry out the words and loudly sing out the hymn, dear friends – God himself IS for you! *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Thank you, Jesus! Amen.*

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.