

## LOVE'S PERSPECTIVE

Sermon, July 24, 2011

Texts: Matthew 13:31-33. 44-52; Romans 8:26-39

I think at times we can forget we live in a wonderful world, a beautiful world, an abundant world. We forget in part because sometimes things happen. Sometimes we can figure out why they happened, but sometimes we cannot. They just happen. There's no explanation; all the pieces of the puzzle are not within our grasp. Our perspective on such events will determine how successful we are in handling them. More to the point, our *faith* (or lack of it) will determine how well we deal with the sometimes tragic events that occur in everyone's life.

Notice Paul writes in our reading from Romans, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him ..." Note it *doesn't* say, "for those who BELIEVE in Him." It says, "... those who LOVE Him." When you love God, you look at life differently than do those who only believe in Him.

I'd like to tell two stories about Methodist pastors this morning. In a sermon delivered on my 43<sup>rd</sup> birthday, the Reverend Richard Stetler of the St. Matthews Methodist Church of Bowie, MD told of a nine year old boy in his congregation who died of leukemia. As the pastor approached the boy's house to see the parents, he wasn't sure he would be able to answer all the questions those parents would undoubtedly have ... questions like: "If God is a God of love, why this? Why didn't God answer our prayers? What more could we have done? Why would God give us such a beautiful son and either allow him to die or take him away from us?" What the pastor didn't know was that he would receive a lesson in mature Christian faith from these grieving parents.

As he approached the front door, even before he knocked the door opened and he was greeted by the father. All Pastor Stetler could think of to say was, "I'm so sorry." (*Which, by the way, is a very good thing to say in sad and tragic situations. Share your sorrow readily; share your advice only if asked.*) The father said, "Thank you Dick, but don't be. We are sad, of course, but Jean and I are so profoundly grateful to God that we had Billy for the nine years we did!" There were no questions. There was no anger. Certainly there was sadness, but there was no bitterness. The Reverend Stetler went on to say in that sermon: "Both of them were standing in another place. You see, they knew and loved God." They not only *knew* God, they *loved* God. When love is authentic, there is trust ... and they trusted God. And that made all the difference. They didn't believe God had cruelly given their son leukemia in order to somehow punish them or to test them. They didn't have a God like that. Instead, they gave God thanks for allowing them to have their son as long as they did. That's genuine faith. That's a loving faith that brings perspective.

Many people believe in God. But when you move from believing in God to loving God, you discover that life works. Trust me on this. When you move from believing in God to loving God, you discover that life works. You don't always understand *how* it works, and you aren't always happy with every step of the process, and there are certainly hurdles and hardships and setbacks and tears along the way (*as well as triumphs and rewards and accomplishments along the way*), but throughout there is a peace, a stability, a joy undergirding all of life. It doesn't mean we will have all the answers, but we learn to trust in a loving God who will help us withstand the most severe storm and will place our feet on solid ground once again.

Paul had first hand, hard core, hard time experiences in his tumultuous life as an apostle. In today's text Paul itemizes some of what he endured: "Hardship." "Distress." "Persecution." "Famine." "Nakedness." "Peril." "The Sword." As one who had already personally experienced all of these (*except, perhaps, the final death blows of "the sword," which, by the way, he would eventually face*), Paul could personally testify none of these could "separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Nothing can do that. That's perspective.

Now I would love to stand in this pulpit and say that God makes life easy for all those who love Him. But it simply is not true, and this certainly not what this text says. However, I can say along with Paul that I am confident in all things God can and does work to our best good. Sometimes we will go through a difficult experience and it will make us stronger. Often we'll have a new appreciation for our family and friends as a secondary result. More often than not, we'll grow to rely and trust more and more on the promises of a good and loving God. We cannot know all of God's plan and purpose, but we do know this: Life is hard, but God is good, and each of us has the opportunity to share in God's good work.

What Paul wants his first century readers in Rome and his twenty-first century readers in Rhode Island to know is that despite all that happens to us, faith itself is the ultimate victory, the supreme triumph. Whatever battle we face, the final outcome is never in question. The world's eyes may see nothing more than only the distress, the famine, and even the death. But the eyes of faith see and have the perspective there is nothing ... "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" ... nothing in the universe that "... will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord".

And now for my second story about a Methodist pastor. Under the Communist regime behind the Iron Curtain, many Christians remained faithful despite severe government persecution. The East Bloc regimes forced Christians "inside," believing the church would disappear in one generation. In Czechoslovakia, for example, the authorities would not allow churches to have signs outside their buildings or to ring their bells. Christians were at risk if they shared their faith with someone outside the church. For over forty years the bells of the churches in the former Czechoslovakia stood silent. The communist government forbade it ... no bells, only silence. No overt witnessing to your faith or inviting others to worship, there was only to be conformity to the communist line. Then something unexpected happened. On November 9, 1989, the news came from Berlin the dreaded wall dividing that city was going down. Soviet oppression was ending. On November 27, 1989 a Methodist pastor in Prague, a Reverend Vilem Schneeberger, began defiantly and vigorously ringing the church bell of his parish. The pigeons in the belfry were as startled as the people of the town! Soon, the joyous sound of church bells began to toll throughout the city of Prague and subsequently throughout the country, as other long suffering, faithful pastors literally chimed in. The Rev. Schneeberger then erected outside his church the first evangelical message in forty years. The banner stretched across the church door read: "**THE LAMB WINS!**" That triumphant message evokes a picture of the meekness and the power of Jesus Christ, which, by the way, is the central theme of the book of Revelation. "**The Lamb Wins!**" Throughout the pages of Revelation, Jesus is portrayed as the sacrificial Lamb who redeems us. Yet despite the gentleness represented by a lamb, Jesus is also the mighty Judge who will defeat all who oppose Him.

One day a banner will fly over all this world, "**The Lamb Wins!**" Not the Bear, not the Dragon, not the Tiger, not even the bald Eagle. "**The Lamb Wins!**" That's the kingdom Jesus proclaimed. There will come a time when God's kingdom will reign in every heart, and every knee shall bow and every tongue confess the Lamb is Lord. There will come a time when all people will live in peace and harmony under this victory banner. This is God's plan and purpose for the world; this is where all nations are destined!

I like to think of it like this. Most of you know I am a Philadelphia Eagles fan. On those rare occasions when an Eagles game is televised here in Patriot country, I watch it. And if I can't watch it, I record it. If I have recorded the game, I try not to listen to any news on TV or talk to anyone about football until after I've watched the recording of the game. However hard I try, though, occasionally I inadvertently find out the final score. What a difference it makes as I'm watching the recorded game if I know the end result! If I know the Eagles have already won, and I watch on the DVD as DeSean Jackson drops another perfectly thrown Michael Vick pass ... no problem! I know they're going to win! Or, if the Eagles had lost, and I see LeSean McCoy breaking four tackles for an amazing touchdown run, I'm thinking, "Big deal. They're going to lose. It doesn't matter." Knowing the end result changes my whole perspective on the game. If I know my team has won the game, it influences how I enjoy it. If the team fumbles the ball or throws an interception, I'm thinking, "That's bad, but it's okay. In the end, we'll win!"

Well, that's how kingdom living works! We can live secure in knowing that in the end, "**The Lamb Wins!**" Secure in that knowledge, we live confidently knowing that all things do work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purposes. That's the "Love Perspective." One more quick analogy here at the closing: People who travel internationally often set their watches to their destination time as soon as they board an airplane. They start living in the time zone to which they are traveling; that's a great way to get up to speed and fight jet lag and enjoy the time you have at your destination. So it is with life in the kingdom. We live looking forward to that day when God reigns over this world and we live looking forward to God's reign over all, and we set the clock of our hearts with those eternal clocks, thus allowing us to have a feeling of inner security and well-being that the world simply cannot give. **The Lamb Wins!** That's the "Love Perspective."