

Better than Conquest

(This message is part of a series on Romans titled "Based on a Promise, Called for a Purpose.")

Romans 8:31-39

I saw in the news that Ellis Island closed 55 years ago this past week, on Nov 12 1954. Ellis Island was the main gateway for immigrants to the US for more than 60 years, and during that time more than 20 million people entered America through its gates. One of them was my grandmother. She moved here from Italy with two young sons to rejoin my grandfather who was working here. They were just one family in the waves of immigration from Europe and other places in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Immigration is controversial both here and in the US, I know, but on balance I think it's had an enormously positive impact on American culture. If we're honest we know that few if any of us come from Native American families, and of course now a lot of us are living and working in still another country not our own.

How we enter a new place—how we make a life in a new culture—is important for us not only in relation to our nationality, but also to our identity as Christians.

31What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32He 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? 33Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. 34Who is he that condemns? 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. 35Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? 36As it is written:

*"For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."*

37No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

38For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39neither 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.

As we continue our journey through Paul's letter to the Romans, it's helpful to be reminded of what he was trying to accomplish:

The letter to the Romans was written to convince the Gentile Christians in Rome that God could be trusted because he kept his promises to his Jewish covenant people.

It was also a reminder to the Jewish people that they hadn't left their old faith behind for a new one, but that Christ was the completion of the faith they'd held all along.

The substance of Paul's case is that we were made to have a close relationship with God—that we were made for that kind of closeness and intimacy with him. We were meant to live that way, but it all got complicated by our sin. For our purposes today and in this series, sin is anything—anything at all—that gets in the way of the relationship we were meant to have with God.

But God doesn't leave us hanging. If you trace the history of the human relationship to God you see that God has always provided a way—no matter what we do to mess it up—God has always provided a way for us to come back to him—that's the point of the Old Testament Law and the prophets and the promise of a Messiah.

God always provides a way back to him, no matter what we've said or done or even believed before this moment.

So what about our passage today?

Paul starts with a list of rhetorical questions—we looked at the first one of these last week. After his radical statement: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose." After

that, Paul asks some questions:

What do we say in response to all that God has done?

If God is for us, who can be against us?

If God didn't spare his own son, is there any limit to his generosity and love toward us?

If that's true, then who can accuse God of anything?

If God is God and we're not, then who is in a position to judge us?

And if that's true, and Christ died for us and continues to pray for us, then we see this amazing promise:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

This is like those situations where we go in with a lot of questions, but someone has thought of them already and provided us with answers.

We're called to engage the culture as redeemed people with a message of good news. If you think about that you'll come up with a ton of questions, but in this passage Paul offers us answers that work about what we're called to do—about who we're supposed to be.

Paul asks: "Shall trouble or hardship or nakedness or danger or sword keep us from the love of Christ?"

That's a pretty comprehensive list, isn't it? Hardship, trouble, any form of shame (that's what 'nakedness' would have meant to Paul's readers), or even violence.

Will any of those keep us from experiencing the blessings of being in the presence of God?

Paul answers with a flat "NO." Why? Because we're 'more than conquerors through

him who loved us.'

When we come to Christ in faith we re-enter our own world, our own culture, but not as an invading army. This time we come more as immigrants, coming in to make new lives for ourselves and influence the lives of our neighbors.

That may seem like we're being a lot less than conquerors, but in the values of Christ's kingdom it's a lot more than that.

Being a Christian in this world is more than just moving into a new territory and settling in. It's about bringing change to the culture in Christ's name. It's more than coming in as an occupying force, like the Germans in France or Holland during WWII.

Acting as conquering invaders is clearly not what Paul is suggesting for us as Christians in the world.

Here's the point: We aren't called to conquer or even to win—this isn't about having power or authority or privilege. This is about the call Christ makes on our lives to live differently because of what he's done for us.

We're called to be more than conquerors—we're called to be agents of transformation.

That's something entirely different—something sacrificial and life-changing. In the end the call to be more than conquerors is the call to be Christ-like—to live as models of the reconciling renewing restoring work of Christ himself.

How do we reshape ourselves into that kind of church? How do we become people like that, both individually and as a community of faith?

It's risky, just as it is for immigrants to a new nation and culture—we won't always be accepted—we might not even be accepted very often at all.

But whether or not people accept the message of the gospel is really God's business. Most of us wouldn't dream of taking the credit for the way the gospel

spreads and takes root. Why would we take the blame if we've been faithful in living it and sharing it?

The real fear is that somehow God won't be with us as we do his work—that we'll be abandoned as we face a hostile culture and even friends and family who don't want to hear us talking about God, or about Jesus, or just try bringing up the Holy Spirit in some places.

The fear is that we'll be left alone in our work as disciples of Jesus Christ.

That's where that final, wonderful, amazing, life-changing promise comes in:

Paul says: *"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."*

That promise is one of the great excuse-killers in the entire Bible. It doesn't just appear there, disconnected from anything else. It comes as a part of the call to all of us to be living models of the gospel—to be agents of reconciliation—to live our lives as forgiven sinners who've been adopted into God's family and given full inheritance rights.

This last promise is Paul's way of cutting the legs out from all the excuses we use to avoid being the people God calls us to be.

Let's see, "death nor life": so even dying is no excuse, and neither is how busy we are in our lives.

Angels and demons can't stop us—neither can pretending that angels and demons don't exist.

"Present or future?" All the stuff we're doing—and this church has some of the busiest people I've ever known—all the stuff we're doing and all the plans we've made for next week and next summer and next year. None of that is an excuse.

“Nor any powers”, Paul says. That means that terrorism can’t stop us—neither can Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens or evolution or someone who smirks or rolls their eyes at you when they see you reading a Bible.

The rest of the list covers just about everything else we might use as excuses for giving up. “Height nor depth nor anything else in all creation...” None of it can separate us from God’s love as we live out the message he gave to us. Nothing.

OK, now that’s a long string of tough talk, but it’s important for us to remember what it means. God will never leave us, no power can prevent us, nothing can stop us, from being the people God made us to be: more than just conquerors and bullies—but people who live the gospel and share it in meaningful ways with their families and friends and neighbors and strangers.

This is better than conquest. It’s better than looking good or feeling important. It’s better than acting like we’re better than other people or piling up possessions for ourselves.

It’s better than throwing our weight and money around and calling it mission work.

This is about being a part of a relationship that will change everyone and everything and every place in the world. Being more than conquerors means learning new ways to interact with people who haven’t heard or don’t believe the good news of Jesus Christ.

In the new Presbyterian study catechism that we’ll be using in our confirmation class, one of the questions reads:

How should I treat non-Christians and people of other religions?

Listen to this response:

“As much as I can, I should meet friendship with friendship, hostility with kindness, generosity with gratitude, persecution with forbearance, truth with agreement, and error with truth. I should express my faith with humility and devotion as the occasion requires, whether silently or openly, boldly or meekly,

by word or by deed. I should avoid compromising the truth on the one hand and being narrow-minded on the other."

Now catch this part...

"In short, I should always welcome and accept these others in a way that honors and reflects the Lord's welcome and acceptance of me."

Friends that's what it looks like to be "more than conquerors," and that's my prayer not only for our commitment to missions in this church, but also for the way we live each day as disciples of Jesus Christ.