

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

## TOGETHER FOR GOOD

Romans 8:28-39; June Anders Funeral; November 19, 2020

A lot has changed since I became a pastor at St. Paul, Fairmont, over 14 years ago, but something that never changed – until now – was that June and Gerald were always together. They were together coming to church. They were together in their home, and later at Ingleside in their apartment. They were together in their rides out into the countryside, especially during planting and harvesting time when Gerald was still able to drive – something that caused Gerald a little trouble with a stumble and fall in the field once. If my memory hasn't failed me, I think that the two of them used to travel the country together in a motor home.

When God said of Adam after He created him, **“It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make a helper fit for him”** (Gen. 2:18), God had in mind a man like Gerald and brought June to him to be his wife. Last February (a good month of the year for farmers to get married, half way between harvest and planting) they celebrated together their 77<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. What a blessing from God! I'm not aware of any other members who were married for so long. They had a good, long marriage. God brought them “together for good” for a life they could share with each other

I think that this past year had to be the hardest for them since it brought separations from each other due to poor health. June really struggled being apart from Gerald, though it could not be helped. And the terrible COVID-19, which has kept families apart, preventing them from being able to gather for times such as these, and pastors from being able to visit the members of their flock in nursing homes and assisted living facilities, has put an incredible strain on all of us. And now, June's death has caused another separation, another loss, another hurt. We all need some good and encouraging news.

In June's Confirmation verse from over 80 years ago we have God's promise in Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter eight: **And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to His purpose.** God is working all things for good? In the face of suffering and death, that is not obviously true; it seems more a wish than a fact.

I've heard a lot of people question lately what good can be coming from all the turmoil and suffering we have been going through. Where is the good that God is working? Paul backs up his words with facts. His evidence of God working for good is seen in Jesus, God's Son. **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 with Him graciously give us all things?** This is our Christian hope: despite all the bad we are seeing and experiencing, God is not against us, but still for us in Jesus Christ.

Those who do not have this Christian faith suffer the same things we do, but without hope. You can see false hope in those terrified of dying in this current pandemic. Their lives are focused solely on staying alive because there is nothing to them worse than dying. You can hear it in the things people say at funerals like, "Our loved one who has died will be kept alive in our hearts and memories." I guess there's some truth in that, until you die and the person is forgotten forever and still dead. There is no lasting good in that.

God works together for good, as seen in Jesus Christ. God's Son came into this world because we suffer the effects of sin that will keep killing us until Jesus returns in glory on the Last Day. Christians look forward to that great and glorious day because there has already been a dark day that has defeated death. Because we suffer with sin that leads to death, God the Father did not spare His own Son from that same suffering and death, but gave Him up on the cross to save us all. Jesus took our sin and death into His own body, suffered and died on the cross for us, and buried death in His tomb with His lifeless body.

But we need more than death defeated. We need life. St. Paul goes on: **Christ Jesus is the One who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.** Christian funerals are about more than the death of a loved one; they are about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the resurrection from the dead that promises us. If Jesus had died on the cross and stayed dead in the tomb, all the words and promises of Paul would ring hollow. But death was defeated and left in the tomb of Jesus when He rose from the dead. Jesus has ascended to the right hand of God in heaven where He is preparing a place for all those who are baptized and believe in Him.

This was June's faith, and her faith in Jesus was not in vain. This faith was a daily part of her life with Gerald. This is the seed of faith that was planted in the hearts of their children that grew up to bear fruit.

For as long as they were able, June and Gerald stayed connected to family members through the internet. Often, they talked about receiving a daily devotion or Scripture on their computer. Like so many families today, yours is scattered all over the country and not able to visit often in person. So a little thing like a shared verse over the computer can bring families together. That we can have the same faith in the same God, being encouraged with the same Word of God on the same day does not make the miles between us any less but unites us with God by the Holy Spirit. This was another way that God was working together for good in your family.

Yes, a funeral is about the separation that death causes, but a Christian funeral is especially about the victory God gives us through faith in Jesus Christ. St. Paul asked the obvious question about everything that works to separate us from each other and from God. **Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?** That list of things that separate is only a sampling to which you and I could add a whole bunch more items. But everything else we could add would not take away from the victory we have in Christ.

**No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am sure 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.**

I chose as a title for June's funeral sermon, "Together for Good," drawing on her Confirmation verse from Romans eight, "**we know that all things work together for good to them that love God.**" Despite the sorrow of today caused by June's death separating us from her, God is working together for good. "Together for Good" also has the sense that that this separation is only temporary. Christians look forward to the day when we will be "together for good," together forever, with Jesus and with each other. Amen.