

THE GOD WHO IS FOR US

Romans 8:26-39; Florence Luckow Funeral; July 22, 2017

Florence was one of those church members that a pastor knows well by sight because it was her habit to come to church every week she was able – and probably some weeks she really wasn't able but she came anyway. In the last couple years and especially the last several months as it got harder and harder for her to get out of the house and to church, I offered come out and visit her at home, an invitation that was always graciously declined as unnecessary.

I almost feel guilty for saying it but I was glad for the opportunity to visit her when she had to go to the hospital. I wasn't glad that she was in the hospital because it indicated that a woman who by force of will alone kept herself out of the hospital could no longer avoid it. But Florence being in the hospital gave me the opportunity visit with her longer than a brief conversation at the church door as well as give her the Lord's Supper of Jesus' body and blood that she had missed because she had been unable to come to church.

Florence was never alone when I visited her in the hospital; some family was always there with her: daughters, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. That her family would not leave her to suffer alone says a lot about the kind of woman she was. She had spent a lifetime caring for others: as a young wife and mother with a house full of young children, and some of those years while her husband was overseas fighting the enemy during the war; elderly family members in her home; as a nurse's aide in the hospital and nursing homes; her own husband as he was dying of cancer. Florence modeled in her life what it meant to care for others and became the "go-to person" when others had questions about how best to care.

Something I've noticed about the best care-givers is they do not always deal well with having to be cared for. I'm not saying that Florence was a bad patient, but I got the feeling that she held herself to the highest standard of care-giving and expected others to do the same. I think it frustrated her having to be cared for. I think she might have struggled with losing the ability to do what she did best, caring for others, while becoming dependent on others.

All of our Scripture Readings for today, especially the first from Romans eight, are about the God who cares for His creation. They describe the God who cares for a world that can't care for itself but needs everything from Him to live. From these readings we see a God who has high standards of care for us, impossibly high for us to reach if we dared to try. God's standard of care is to help those whose situation is hopeless to everyone else but Him.

Romans 8:26 states: **The Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words... [That is:] The Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.**

It was clear to everyone who knew her that Florence was growing weaker, and there was nothing any of us could do about it, nothing she could do about it. God is the One who helps the weak. Those of us who don't like to admit our weaknesses and failings sometimes struggle with this. People who are good at caring for others sometimes struggle with admitting that they are weak and need God's care just as much as everyone else. God has a way of humbling the proud by taking away their strength and self-sufficiency, not to punish them, but help them learn faith and trust in Him – things Florence had.

When our first impulse is to rely on ourselves but we can't do that anymore, we don't know what to pray for. The Holy Spirit intercedes on our behalf to our Father and directs us to something we might have learned to sing as children: "Jesus Loves Me." We are reminded that, "I am weak but He is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me." **For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son so we do not perish in our weaknesses. When we are tempted to think that our hard work must count for something before God, the Spirit helps us in our weakness and reminds us: For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast** (Eph. 2:8-9).

When Florence was suffering with physical weakness and it became clear that she wasn't going to get better, it raised a dilemma. What should you pray for? You didn't want her to suffer long, but for her suffering to end meant her death, and losing her would hurt a lot.

Christians face death differently than unbelievers. Death is not our friend that frees us suffering. No, death is the enemy, a curse on God's good creation, the result of sin that causes so much pain and loss in this world. Death causes the pain of separation from family and friends that should never have been except for sin. Death is our enemy, but it is an enemy defeated by Jesus Christ for us.

When death comes it is a reminder that we were not good enough or strong enough to defeat our greatest enemy. And the devil might whisper into our ears that God has failed us in death and it has been a waste to trust in Him. But this is a lie. The devil may bring charges against us, but **it is God who justifies**. We are not condemned in our sins, failures, weaknesses, and death.

St. Paul reminds us that it was Christ who succeeded when we failed. He carried our weaknesses, endured tribulation, distress, persecution, hunger, shameful nakedness, danger and death on the cross to forgive our sins. And **more than that, was raised** from the dead and ascended to the right hand of the Father to intercede on our behalf. This means that when the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh accuse us of not being good enough or strong enough, Jesus stands before His Father and says, "That weak one is mine; I paid for her with my own blood. I put our name on her when I baptize her: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

I appreciate it when God's own children list their baptisms into Christ in their obituaries. Florence's read: "was baptized January 28, 1923 at Zion Lutheran Church, Fraser." This was stated correctly in the passive tense of the verb. Baptism wasn't something Florence did for God but something done by Him for her. Churches that won't baptize infants have lost the gospel sense of Baptism as God receiving us by grace for Jesus' sake. Lutherans love to point to their baptisms because they are proof that God is for them in Christ.

Florence had high standards in her life for the care she provided. But God's standard of care is the highest. Because of Christ, she is more than a conqueror through God who loved her. Not even death could separate her from the love of God in Christ Jesus her Lord. And death, finally, will not separate her from those she loved and the ones who love her because God will raise us on the last day. Amen.