

LOVE CONQUERS ALL  
(Romans 8:31-9:5)

I have chosen to return to the New Testament letter to the church in Rome for this morning's sermon. In the past few months, we have bounced back and forth between texts in the Gospel of Matthew and texts in the letter of Romans for our Sunday morning sermons. Today, we're back in Romans. Next week, who knows? In mentally casting about for a title for today's sermon, I thought of a song title again. I thought of the song, "Love Conquers All." I had a particular song in mind, but when I searched the song title, I found many songs with that title. Perhaps you know some of them. Seals and Croft and Deep Purple performed songs by that name. Others that I never heard of like the new wave band ABC, Anthony Hamilton and a rapper called Struggle Jennings have all recorded songs by that name. I knew of none of those. I had in mind a song by Christian blues and rock artist Darrell Mansfield from his 1979 album, Higher Power, an album I purchased in my early album buying days. I thought that the title was apt for today's sermon since Paul speaks of conquering and love in Romans 8:37. I also thought it was a good theme thought for what I want to develop, that is, an understanding of the struggle that Paul expressed in Romans 9 and a potential comfort in that struggle found in the preceding verses in Romans 8.

The New Testament lectionary text for today is actually only Romans 9:1-5. I found it hard to see how to develop a good sermon on those verses alone. I invite you to take some time with that set of five verses and tell me what kind of sermon you would have developed. Doug Bratt's online commentary inspired me to pair those verses with the preceding verses in Romans 8. Could we find in Paul's verses about nothing separating us from the love of Christ in Romans 8 an antidote to his struggle about his people rejecting Jesus in Romans 9? And could such an antidote speak to us if and when we struggle with concern about others rejecting Jesus? Let's consider those questions as we examine Paul's thought in today's text.

We begin, then, with what is the New Testament text for today, Romans 9:1-5. In verse 1, Paul writes, "I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit. The New International Version doesn't exactly clarify what Paul is talking about. Does this phrase about what Paul finds confirmed relate to what is coming in his writing or to what he has already written. The New American Standard Bible and Revised Standard Version clarify that Paul is referring to what is coming after this in the text. Then his conscience confirms in the Holy Spirit that he has great sorrow and anguish. It feels odd that Paul would need to add such a phrase to his expression of anguish. Maybe it's better to relate it to the words that preceded that phrase. We'll come back to the question of what Paul's phrase relates to. I'll leave it sit for now with the reminder that it is the beginning of today's lectionary New Testament text.

What follows is Paul's expression of the great sorrow and unceasing anguish that exists in his heart. We need to think about the reason for Paul's expression of great sorrow and unceasing anguish. We get some sense in the following verses. He expresses the thought that he would be okay with being cursed and cut off from Christ if that would somehow help his own kin turn to Christ. He is thinking about the people of Israel. Clearly, Paul writes as a Jew who believes that Jesus is the Messiah, God who came to earth in human form. Paul wishes that his people would

join him in this belief and participate in the mission that Jesus came to earth to model and teach. Later in the chapter, Paul indicates that the people of Israel have not responded as he would wish.

Let's think about that history a bit. We begin with Jesus coming to Earth, born into Jewish ancestry. In his life of teaching, healing and inspiring, he interacted almost entirely with the people of Israel. The disciples of Jesus were chosen from among the people of Israel. When the Holy Spirit came on the followers of Jesus and inspired the beginning of the community of faith that came to be known as the Christian church, that community was almost entirely composed of people who hailed from Israel. In the book of Acts we find the Jewish followers of Jesus beginning to share the good news of Jesus with Gentiles, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit at work in their community. Especially through the travelling ministry of Paul, many Gentiles came to follow Jesus as well. Eventually, the community of Jesus followers became more and more Gentile and less Jewish. Here in Romans 9, Paul laments that development. He thinks of the way that God worked with the ancestors of the people of Israel and the way that Israel received, due to God's direction, the agreements between God and the people, the legacy of temple worship and the law that came by the hand of Moses. Through that ancestry, they had also received Jesus Christ. They were connected fully to the story of God and his people that had culminated in Jesus coming to Israel. But, they were not fully receptive to Jesus.

Paul's lament in this text comes out of that history. Paul's lament is indicative of the concern of the leaders of the community of Jesus followers in the first century and their puzzlement over the people of Israel not turning toward Jesus. Paul's lament is not written from the perspective of a Christian criticizing Judaism. Paul's lament is written by a Jewish follower of Jesus who wondered what God was doing in all this. It didn't seem right to him and to other church leaders that God would come to Israel as Jesus and then let Israel be unreceptive to Jesus. He was trying to understand God in all of this. I credit Matt Skinner, in his online commentary, for inspiring that understanding of Paul in this text. ([Commentary on Romans 9:1-5 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#))

Now, for some more background. I noted in an earlier sermon on Romans that the letter is written to a church where there are big questions about how Jews and Gentiles live together in the church, the community of Jesus followers. History tells us that the Roman emperor, Claudius, expelled Jews from Rome around 50 CE. Several years later, Jews were allowed to return. In the meantime, the Christian church in Rome had grown without Jewish presence. When the Jews returned to Rome, there will have been Christian Jews in the returning group. The church in Rome, then, would have faced the question of how to integrate Jewish followers of Jesus into their community. How would they live together? How would they manage different ideas of how to live faithfully to God? (with information drawn from J. R. Daniel Kirk, [Romans for Normal People](#), pp. 8,9) Paul's letter to the church in Rome tried to bring them together. And his letter spoke to the question we see in today's lectionary text, the concern about Jews who did not choose to follow Jesus.

When I give you my understanding of that background context for Paul's lament, I feel concerned that you could understand me to be critiquing Judaism. In the history of the Christian church, the criticism and judgment of Judaism is a dark stain. I want to make it clear that I want nothing to do with that. I'm just trying to help us understand Paul's lament.

I suggest that the passage in the letter that preceded today's text from Romans 9:1-5 was something that Paul leaned on as he lived with lament. We included Romans 8:31-39 as part of our Scripture reading this morning because I think Paul would have said that those verses spoke to his lament. Those verses soar in their description of God's love, a love that is always present,

a love that does not allow anything to separate itself from humanity. Paul had just remembered the way that God had called people to become like Jesus. A God who was for humans in that way would surely not allow anything to separate people from God's love. A God who was willing to give up God's Son for humanity would surely continue to shower people with God's goodness. Paul continues to think about all kinds of troubles that humans can face. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?" (Rom. 8:35) "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 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." (Rom. 8:37-39) I have sometimes read these verses with people who have been living in great personal distress or approaching possible death from the perspective that these verses are an encouragement when life becomes overly hard. Surely, it is appropriate to apply these verses about the broad and undefeatable love of God in that situation. I wonder, though, if Paul means to apply these verses primarily to the problem we viewed in the following text.

We look at the text we've read today from Romans 8 and 9 and see a chapter division. We think Paul has moved on from one theme to another because that number 9 precedes the following verses. We should always remember that the books of the Bible did not originally have verse and chapter divisions. Those divisions have helped us to organize the Bible and find things, but they can get in the way of understanding the flow of thought at times. This may be one of those times. Think of this. Paul has just completed those great verses about God's love. Then he writes the phrase that we considered earlier, the first verse of chapter 9. "I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit." It seems likely that Paul is thinking of what he has just written when he writes this. This vision of the undefeatable love of God is what Paul says is the truth he is speaking. It makes sense that Paul would write about his conscience confirming such a significant statement in the Holy Spirit. And with that, he launches into his lament about the people of Israel.

If that is the best way to understand Paul's development of thought, then Paul is communicating the idea that God's love will not be defeated in the matter of the people of Israel. God will continue to love Israel and draw Israel to God. In the context of the church in Rome, this spoke to the community of faith with the message that Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus should live together in the community. When one side thought that the other side's rituals and ancient practices were a hindrance, God's love should draw them together. When the other side thought that their rituals and ancient practices were absolutely necessary to live faithfully to God, they should see that God's love was with those who thought otherwise. And when those who were convinced that God had sent Jesus to draw people into following Jesus in their expression of living faithfully to God lamented that others were not following exactly the same path, they could trust that God's love would not be defeated and would somehow include those people in the community of God.

Can we draw some useful applications for ourselves from this understanding of today's text? I think so. First, let's allow this text to say what I noted earlier and what I have often used it for. When it feels like God must be against us because of all the hard things we have to endure in life, these verses from Romans 8 say that's not so. The hardships of life are not indicators of God not loving us. They do not defeat God's love. God's love remains constant in whatever situations we experience.

Second, let's allow Paul's words give us rest when we live with lament about our loved ones' decisions against following Jesus. It seems to me that Paul's words speak strongly to a sense that God's love will not be defeated. In the end, it will conquer rejection. I'm not trying to declare a universal salvation and say that no one can ultimately resist God, but I want to rest with the sense in these verses that God's love will accomplish much more than I could imagine.

Third, let's allow Paul's words to guide our ways of relating to each other when we find ourselves in tension and division in the church. We certainly recognize that there was tension and division between the Jewish and Gentile components in the early church. It seems to me that Paul's words about nothing separating the church from God's love were intended to encourage the varied people of God to accept each other and not judge each other. God's love was bigger than their division. In our time, it's pretty clear that the issue of whether to affirm people who are same-sex attracted and live in committed same-sex relationships is dividing our churches and results in hurt and hostility within churches in some situations. I feel like the message of this text would encourage us to relax. It would encourage us to see each other with our differing views on this question as all being people who desire to be faithful to God. It would tell us that God's love is bigger than our divisions. It seems to me that it would call us to stop judging each other as being unfaithful to God. We should be able to remain in association with people we don't agree with on some matters because of our common commitment to live out the Jesus vision by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps the words of the song I thought about with this sermon's title offer an encouraging thought when we think through these implications of today's text. In my opinion, Darrell Mansfield's lyrics are a little ambiguous, as song lyrics often are, and not overly thought-provoking but the simple message of the chorus is a pretty good one to have running through one's head. "Love conquers all; you can conquer all with love."