



The Westminster Pulpit

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“Making Nothing out of Something” **Sermon on Romans 8:26-39**

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Our text comes from Paul’s letter to the Romans. I don’t preach much from Romans.

You see, my hunch about Paul’s letter to the Romans is that Paul has been posed a theological problem. If God made a covenantal promise to Abraham that all his descendants would be called the “Children of God,” and if we are to believe that God doesn’t turn back on a promise, what do you do with that in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

In other words, in light of Christ, do we tell Sarah and Abraham, “Hey, great story, don’t know how you did it raising a child when you’re 102, and I know how you suffered in waiting for God to fulfill the promise, but because of Jesus, we are all children of God.” Do we say to Moses, “Moses, thank you for wandering around in the wilderness for all your life? But that law you carried, toss it out! Thanks for living your life, but because of the righteousness that comes from Jesus Christ, your life, your story, doesn’t mean so much. Sorry to tell you that.”

“These are covenants, Paul! Does God back out of promises? Yes or no, Paul?” Paul has a problem, and Romans is Paul’s theological answer.

I suspect that’s why I don’t preach on Romans. I just have a hunch that none of you got out of bed this morning and thought, “I wonder if God reneged on his promise to Israel?” If you did wake up thinking that, please see me after this service. I have a list of therapists for you. Plus, a list of other problems that are far more pressing. Paul’s problem isn’t ours.

But oddly, Paul’s answer is our answer to our problem of making NOTHING out of SOMETHING! Listen!

Romans 8:26-39

Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words. And God, who searches hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit

intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son but gave him up for all of us, how will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ who died, or rather, who was raised, who is also at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us. For I am convinced 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.

Wow! Now wasn't that something! Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus!

Most of the time, when it comes to nothing, we make it into something! For example, the other day I was walking my dog, Bella, she's a Golden Retriever. It is a breed of animal that is insanely happy. I often read the headlines of the news to my dog, and she takes it all in with a smile. Joyfully ignorant!

But as I was saying, I was walking Bella outside of our neighborhood, and she squatted for a second, and at that very instant a woman came out of nowhere walking across her lawn and said, "I guess I'll pick that up." And I smiled and chuckled, because I didn't know what else to do. She said, "I don't find it funny." And I said, "Excuse me, but my dog didn't do what you think she did. She didn't do a do doo. It wasn't done. And if she did, I would pick it up. I always do." And the woman just scowled at me.

And now I'm telling you about it, because I'm not over it. Who does she think I am? I've offended her, and she's offended me. And now, when Bella and I walk by her house, I say, "Bella, we're going to walk on the street lest the wicked witch comes out on her broom." And Bella just looks at me....

And she says to me, "You're such an idiot. You're making nothing into something. Look at this day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it!" She's right!

I mean, if I die, I mean, when I die, I don't think at my funeral I'd like someone to say, "Today we want to remember Donovan. Remember how he was accused of not doing the do-

do, because the dog didn't do." I don't want that brought up at my funeral; that's nothing, in a life filled with something. I mean, I've biked across Iowa! Two and a half times!

What about you? When have you made nothing into something? If you haven't done it yet, you will. It could be as small as the random car in front of you that sat there on your green arrow. It could be as big as sacrificing friendship or family because of the politics of our day. It could be the biggest thing on your agenda right now, and in a month, you'll look back and think, "What was that all about?"

We are strange creatures! We get so caught up in making nothings into somethings. Pray about it! Pray about it! That's what my wife says at that interminable stop light out there. She calls it her prayer light. I've tried it. "Dear God, I only have this one life, make this light turn green."

And Paul says... "The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We don't know how to pray as we ought." That is to say, sometimes we can take nothing and make it into something! But the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. Taking our little nothings and making them into something. "Lord, Donovan needs some love. Donovan needs to see his bigger calling."

You and I know that we spend way too much time making something out of nothing. But I do think our greater offense is making nothing of something. Really something!

And we heard something that's really something! Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? How about death, or life, angels, rulers, things present, things to come, powers, height, depth... anything? Nothing! Now that's something! We should all wake up in the morning with that on our minds and in our hearts and coursing through our actions.

The Apostle Paul, he must have been really something. Walking around the Mediterranean seeing all these people who need a good word. A friend, a love, some grace. And he starts churches one after another. What a gift! And then he leaves, only to find out that these congregations have taken something and made it into nothing! And then he has to write these letters that get into all the little details. "Hey, you need to stop with the special knowledge stuff. And you two, you two need to quit talking in worship and start listening. And what have you done to the new members' class, circumcision? You can't be serious! What's gotten into you?"

And the church life gets so small! And we have kept it up. We in the church have taken nothings, and made them into somethings, and it has almost wiped the church off the map.

I got to hand it to Paul. In his letters, he'll break out getting caught up in the weeds and he'll bust forth with something that's really something!

Like nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God!

Or, he'll say something like, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels and have not love, I am nothing. If I have all faith as to remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all that I possess to the poor and sacrifice everything but do not have love, I am nothing. Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious, boastful, or rude. It does not insist on its own way. Love believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

It is really something. And for the church to have something that's really something... and not use it! It would be like having a feast and eating it before those who are starving. It would be like having a river and keeping it from those who are thirsty. It would be like having a key, and holding it back from those who are locked up in bitterness and fear. It would be like having a life raft, and keeping it from those who are drowning.

Who would do that? We would if we made nothing out of something!

Yesterday, I attended a service for someone I didn't really know, but wish that I had. Her daughter got up to speak at her service. Listen to some of the words she said about her mom. They're really something.

"She brimmed with joy, she savored every second, she gave more than she received, she gave us her time and total attention, her heart and joy, she made us laugh, she held us and cried with us, she played and never forgot how to play, she gave and she gave, and she gave, she gave me so many gifts and the most precious of all was the last, to love and to be loved by her. She gave us her... to take care of her, to watch and learn from her."

"The last 14 months of her life was a gift. She was a gift to behold. She swelled with gratitude for her precious husband, her growing family, her dearest friends, for every person on her medical team, for the joy of painting and all the kindred spirits it brought to her life. She celebrated every piece of good news, no matter whose news it was, or how small, she cherished the beauty of each changing season of new life, of her life. And in the face of uncertainty and fear, in the face of hard news, harder news, the hardest news, her gratitude and her love only grew. Her love for us, and ours for her, and ours for one another, it grew, and it grew, and it grew, into a searing, soaring force that was undeniable, unshakable. Eternal, divine."

"This is the gift she left us. This is the gift she left me. It was the honor of my life to accept it. It is the honor of my life to have it now. To hold it, to carry it, to reveal the weight of it. And I promise I will."

Someone will say that of us one day! Maybe even tomorrow, if we make something out of nothing! "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus!"