

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

In today's reading from Romans, we hear the apostle Paul ask a rapid series of questions: "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?"

The questions are raised at the end of Paul's larger celebration of our hope in Christ. But Paul's celebration of hope is never a celebration for its own sake. The exhilaration and joy that is present in today's reading is meant to sweep us up and carry us forward into the future. For Paul, there could be no thought of returning to old ways. Instead, the message that Paul is so eagerly communicating to us is recognition that Christ prepares the way for what is next and that it is a way toward the victory of God's love for all.

Let Us Be Gathered

Confession and Forgiveness

Blessed be the holy Trinity, † one God,
who forgives all our sin,
whose mercy endures forever.
Amen.

Let us confess our sin in the presence of God.
Silence is kept for reflection.

Most merciful God,
we confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves.
We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us.
Forgive us, renew us, and lead us,
so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your holy name.
Amen.

God, who is rich in mercy,
loved us even when we were dead in sin,
and made us alive together with Christ.
By grace you have been saved.

In the name of † Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven.
Almighty God strengthen you with power through the Holy Spirit,
that Christ may live in your hearts through faith.
Amen.

Gathering Song

"God, Who Stretched the Spangled Heavens," is our gathering song this week (ELW #. From Idlewild Presbyterian Church in Memphis, Tennessee, senior carillonneur plays a version of this great hymn of hope for the future on the 42 bells of the church's carillon. Enjoy watching him play this rare instrument!

Here is the video link: <https://youtu.be/4EXMgIb9Ac4>.

- 1 *God, who stretched the spangled heavens
infinite in time and place,
flung the suns in burning radiance
through the silent fields of space:
we, your children in your likeness,
share inventive pow'rs with you;
great Creator, still creating,
show us what we yet may do.*

- 2 *We have ventured worlds undreamed of
since the childhood of our race;
known the ecstasy of winging
through untraveled realms of space;
probed the secrets of the atom,
yielding unimagined pow'r,
facing us with life's destruction
or our most triumphant hour.*

- 3 *As each far horizon beckons,
may it challenge us anew:
children of creative purpose,
serving others, hon'ring you.
May our dreams prove rich with promise;
each endeavor well begun;
great Creator, give us guidance
till our goals and yours are one.*

Prayer of the Day

Let us pray.

Beloved and sovereign God,
through the death and resurrection of your Son
you bring us into your kingdom of justice and mercy.
By your Spirit, give us your wisdom,
that we may treasure the life that comes from Jesus Christ,
our Savior and Lord.
Amen.

Let Us Hear God's Word

A reading from First Kings:

⁵At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you." ⁶And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. ⁷And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. ⁸And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. ⁹Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?"

¹⁰It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. ¹¹God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, ¹²now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a

wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you." (1 Kings 3)

*The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.*

A reading from the Psalms:

¹²⁹Your decrees are wonderful;
therefore I obey them with all my heart.
¹³⁰When your word is opened it gives light;
it gives understanding to the simple.
¹³¹I open my mouth and pant
because I long for your commandments.
¹³²Turn to me and be gracious to me,
as you always do to those who love your name.
¹³³Order my footsteps in your word;
let no iniquity have dominion over me.
¹³⁴Rescue me from those who oppress me,
and I will keep your commandments.
¹³⁵Let your face shine upon your servant
and teach me your statutes.
¹³⁶My eyes shed streams of tears,
because people do not keep your teaching.

A reading from Romans:

²⁶The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.
²⁸We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹For 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. ³⁰And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.
³¹What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³²He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶As it is written,
"For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted 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, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor 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. (Romans 8)

*Word of God. Word of life.
Thanks be to God.*

*The holy gospel according to Matthew.
Glory to you, O Lord.*

³¹[Jesus] put before [the crowds] another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field;³²it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

³³He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

⁴⁴“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

⁴⁵“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

⁴⁷“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; ⁴⁸when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. ⁴⁹So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

⁵¹“Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” ⁵²And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” (Matthew 13)

The Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Reflection on the Readings

If there is a single bible reading meant for today’s world, the reading from Romans is quite possibly at the top of the list.

It is one of more well known and favorite scriptural texts of many in the church. Indeed, it may be most remembered for its inclusion in many funeral services. When Paul expresses his personal conviction—that he is convinced that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus—his statement itself is persuasive. It is a testimony to the strength of Christian faith to witness what happens to those gathered at a funeral. Where the power of death and grief is unmistakable, I myself have seen how moving these words from Paul can be. Beyond funerals, though, the reading from Romans has much to offer our world today. It speaks not only of death, but of many forms of separation.

Even before the disastrous and deadly COVID-19 disease entered our world and created a new experience for all of us, separation was recognized as a genuine issue in our lives. Indeed, every choice we make in this world necessarily separates us from some other option. We cannot do everything, and so, when we do anything, we must exclude something—we must leave it behind and let it go. The experience of this is, well, *inseparable* from our humanity.

At the very heart of life within God’s creation is separation from those things and those people we love. No one is able to escape loss and grief. Anyone who has remotely loved anyone or anything will suffer the grief of loss and will know the painful power of separation.

Paul understands this. He understands the conflict of forces that cause separation. He lists many of them explicitly. One of the first that he mentions is hardship. Because it is within a long list, it can be easy to overlook it. But hardship should not be missed—because life *is* hard.

Life is hard. The hardness of life and the struggle it presents us nearly every day can be easy to pass over, but ultimately difficult to ignore. Recognizing this and saying it out loud or acknowledging it to ourselves is not wrong or sinful.

Paul’s list of things that can separate us goes on to include distress. Distress is a frequent force in our lives. When we cannot complete what we have sought to do—the unfinished tasks, the unmet goals, the undelivered promises—we are in distress. When we have done all that we can do, and it is still not enough, we are in distress. And, like waters flowing over a sinking ship, distress overwhelms us.

Paul does not miss persecution as another source of separation. The frequency of persecution in our world seems to ever increase, and that makes it especially significant. Violence done to women and men because of their inclusion in one group of another—whether that grouping is based on biological, social, or convictional grounds—remains a force with devastating capacity to separate.

Paul goes on to name even more sources of separation. Famine, peril, sword, and more. And the weight of all the forces that bring separation into our lives can appear to leave us living as refugees of a battle long lost. So, it is quite remarkable when Paul proclaims to all these sources of separation, “No.”

Shall these things prevail? Shall these things have the power to undo us and separate us from God’s love—the most central element in our lives? No, no, no!

What Paul does is to make a confession. He is convinced, he says, that nothing will prevail against God’s love. The conflict of the powers is engaged face-to-face and head-on, and the victor is God’s love—the love that transforms, reforms, and leads us forward in God’s own everlasting hope. Within Christ, all separations are overcome!

*We shall overcome,
We shall overcome,
We shall overcome, some day.*

*Oh, deep in my heart,
I do believe
We shall overcome, some day.*

*We’ll walk hand in hand,
We’ll walk hand in hand,
We’ll walk hand in hand, some day.*

*Oh, deep in my heart,
We shall live in peace,
We shall live in peace,
We shall live in peace, some day.*

(Hear and see the “We Shall Overcome” anthem sung by the Aeolians Choir of Oakwood University, an historically black Seventh-day Adventist university in Huntsville, Alabama, at this link: <https://youtu.be/UBtmPiCqToI>. Their video does an excellent job of placing this anthem of future hope in the context of our world right now.)

Hymn of the Day

The hymn of the day this week is “Seek Ye First.” It is song #783 in *With One Voice*, our blue hymnal. Members and musicians of United Lutheran Church in Eugene, Oregon, lead our singing as we turn up the volume!

Here is the video link: <https://youtu.be/yV1unUyZ4r4>.

Prayers of Intercession

From our many locations, yet held in one body by the Holy Spirit, we pray for the church, the world, and all who are in need, responding to each petition with words from Psalm 119, “Be gracious to us.”

A brief silence.

For the church, O God of mercy, we pray. Open your word to Christians around the world. Reveal yourself to us in ways both traditional and surprising, in places old and new. Bless our bishops, pastors, deacons, and other church leaders, as they face their challenging tasks.

A brief silence.

Turn to us, O God: **be gracious to us.**

For education and nurture in the church, O God of wisdom, we pray. Give us the will to seek your wisdom. Guide the many churches in their uses of technology, and show us during this time ways to study your word. Accompany all church musicians as they seek to help the church offer its praise.

A brief silence.

Turn to us, O God: **be gracious to us.**

For the earth, O creative God, we pray. Give to plants and animals the water and land they require. Form us into grateful and healing caretakers of your earth. Bless the efforts of scientists and researchers, especially those seeking a vaccine. Lead all people to honor the scientific discoveries that you grant to humankind.

A brief silence.

Turn to us, O God: **be gracious to us.**

For the nations, O God of justice, we pray. Direct leaders of nations to resist the ways of violence. Stifle the lust for conquest. Bring peace to the Middle East. Visit the people of Hong Kong. Move us away from racist attitudes and policies. Form leaders who will speak with honesty, strive for justice, and work to alleviate the nation's needs.

A brief silence.

Turn to us, O God: **be gracious to us.**

For all in need, O God of compassion, we pray. Heal the sick, especially for Pat, Valetta, Paul, Vallie, LaVaune, Kathy, Frank, Lisa, Rita, April, Bev, Bob, Beth, Marlene, and all those we name before you now. Feed the hungry. House the refugee. Comfort the countless thousands who are dealing with the coronavirus. Accompany those living with anxiety and despair. Form us to be your arms of mercy.

A brief silence.

Turn to us, O God: **be gracious to us.**

For the youth, O God of grace, we pray. Give to the youth of afflicted nations an inspiring dream of what their future might be. Give them patience to await a time of safety. Direct all schools from daycare through graduate school to find an acceptable way forward, especially the schools, colleges, and university right here in our community.

A brief silence.

Turn to us, O God: **be gracious to us.**

You, O God, are our pearl beyond price. You are the tree giving us eternal refuge. Hear now, we pray, the petitions of our hearts.

A longer time of silence

Turn to us, O God: **be gracious to us.**

In gratitude for the lives of our beloved dead, we pray that nothing, neither death nor life, will separate us from your love. At the end, gather us with all your saints in light everlasting.

A brief silence.

Turn to us, O God: **be gracious to us.**

Into your hands, gracious God, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through Jesus Christ, our Savior. **Amen.**

Offering Prayer

In our offerings this week, let us hear, pray, and sing “Be Thou My Vision” (ELW #793). The 2020 senior class of Asbury University in Wilmore, Kentucky, leads us in yet another great song of hope. The university is named for Francis Asbury, one of the first two bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States.

Here is the video link: <https://youtu.be/MfM7IqVyH8U>.

Let Us Be Sent in Service

Sending Prayer

Let us pray.

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and forever.
Amen.

Sending Song

“Sent Forth by God’s Blessing” (ELW #547) is the song this week in which we step into the future. Holy Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church in Franklin Park, Illinois, provides the leadership for this song.

Here is the video link: <https://youtu.be/15Iz9bs3gys>. (Words are included in the video.)

Benediction

The Lord bless us and keep us.
The Lord’s face shine on us with grace and mercy.
The Lord look upon us with favor and ☩ give us peace.
Amen.