

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, July 14, 2024

Okay, friends, we're going to try this again, maybe with me not holding on to the receiver, and we'll see how well this goes as I turn some pages; but as we gather now into a time of scripture, I invite you to join me in the spirit of prayer. Let us pray.

Loving and gracious God, be present as you have long promised. Open our hearts and minds that we might hear you and experience you, that we can be sent out once again strengthened as your people, who know your love and are ready to share it with the world. Amen.

Our scripture this morning comes from Romans, chapter 8 starting with verse 28. I invite us to hear these words from the early church.

We know that all things work together[for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose. For those whom God foreknew God also predestined to be conformed to the image of the Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom God predestined God also called, and those whom God called God also justified, and those whom God justified God also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? The one who did not withhold his own Son but gave him up for all of us, how will God not with Christ 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 hardship 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 conquerors through God 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

Friends, these are the words of Our Lord. Thanks be to God.

I don't know if we knew this consciously when we were preparing our Theology 101 series this summer, but the 10th of July was the 515th anniversary of Calvin's birth in France, so there is some poetic irony for us to be talking about Predestination for our Theology 101 today. Actually, in the last month or so I've had a couple of conversations, both with Presbyterian colleagues and with ecumenical colleagues, who have given me quite a bit of side-eye when I admit that I am a Calvinist. They look at me a little askance, and it is my hope today that I can give you all, and

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perhaps them if they are listening in, some idea of what I mean when I say that. The central piece of Calvin's theology and the central piece of my personal theology is a belief in the absolute sovereignty of God. For Calvin, his reading of scripture, his study and prayer demonstrated that God was not something humans could control no matter how hard we tried or how often we lied to ourselves about it. The God that created the heavens and the Earth, that made you and made me, that causes the flowers to bloom and the birds to sing, that God is beyond anything we can imagine. As God says to Job in our Hebrew scriptures when Job begins to complain about God's works, "Were You there when I laid the foundations of the Earth? Have you ever given orders to the morning." When faced with those questions, the only correct answer is the one Job gives God. "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know." Calvin believed firmly in a God that is not at all constrained by any power, particularly the powers of this world, even the power of death, as our text from Romans 8 today reflects.

Now this undergirding belief in a sovereignty of God shaped also Calvin's most controversial theological concept, the one we talk about today—predestination. Now even though predestination is most closely associated with Calvin in our cultural consciousness, if you can even really say that. He didn't create a doctrine of predestination out of thin air; the Presbyterians didn't create something brand new. Since centuries ago Paul, as witnessed in our letter to the Romans today, was writing in his letters about predestination long before Calvin was knit in his mother's womb, as Courtney told our children today. Theologians like Augustine and Martin Luther also spoke at length and reflected at length about predestination. But based on Paul's writings and the writings of the theologians that came before him, Calvin did develop an overarching framework for understanding predestination that has then become more common among many Protestant denominations.

Now at the start I want to be clear. I've already heard a couple of jokes about this today. Calvin's understanding of predestination is only concerned with our salvation. When we say predestination, it does not mean that I was predestined to break both bones in my arm when I was 9 years old pretending to be Mary Lou Retina in my backyard. It did not mean that someone was predestined to have cancer or that you were predestined to meet your spouse in the vegetable aisle or even predestined to be here to hear this sermon this morning. As much as we joke about it, as Courtney shared last week in worship, providence—the idea of providence deals with God's actions and hope and trust, movement in our lives and the history of the world in ways small and large. That comes closer to what we joke about, but even then providence does not say that God is controlling the choices we make or that all of our life is already planned out and that we have no free will. Calvin's writings state clearly that predestination deals solely with the idea that God can save who God chooses to. Essentially, when you hold the sovereignty of God in conjunction with the idea of salvation of a people, Calvin is telling us God is powerful enough to do whatever God darn well chooses, and that no amount of work, no amount of bargaining, no amount of worrying, nothing humans can do will change that. Calvin is reminding us that we are passive in our salvation. We are not active. One of the central themes of the Reformation that distinguishes us from other denominations—Sola Gratia Sola Fide. We are saved by grace alone through faith, grace that is an undeserved and unearned gift of God. And there is and can be really immense

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comfort in that, especially for someone who comes from a tradition that emphasized that right living was the way to earn salvation. Predestination is one of the ways that we articulate, that we recognize, that God is in control, no matter how much that scares or bothers us, and it can mean a release of our fear, maybe, and an opportunity to respond to God in faith.

Some of you may be familiar with people who have pushed Calvin's thought about predestination to what they say is a logical conclusion—that God saves some and condemns others, a doctrine that we call Double Predestination. Some go up, some go down basically. In his own writings Calvin says that's possible because God is sovereign, but it's useless for us to speculate about what God is really going to do. By the same standards, if we thought about it, God should just condemn us all. If we're focused on God's justice, the only just thing for all of us is that none of us live up to God's call in our lives. The opposite side of that coin from the perspective of others, the real question would be why a loving God condemns anyone. It is God alone who saves. Who can get in the way of that, not really anyone. As Paul says in our scripture, “Who can bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus.”

And as we hold these juxtapositions in tension, and we have through the history of Christianity since the Reformation, we recognize it's hard to reconcile scripture and lived human experience, because is it good news to those who are suffering to say God loves some of you but not all of you? And on the other hand is it good news to say to those who are struggling, it doesn't matter how bad the person who hurts you is, God's okay with that? As we attempt to make sense of these things, we fall into the trap of trying to constrain God. To quote my theology professor Shirley Guthrie, “On the one hand we describe God too much like an arbitrary tyrant, and on the other God looks too much like a sentimental, entirely permissive grandparent.”

Now for me, for our text this morning, the key to carrying predestination with us in our everyday lives and to live out God's promise of it is that it should neither be a weapon nor a crutch. We cannot use the doctrine of predestination as a way to put a fence around salvation. We don't know who is in and who is out. God alone decides. Thus we cannot and should not weaponize a version of God's love to say who gets in and who gets left out. We follow a God who consistently barrels through any of the divisions that we conjure, any constraints that we attempt to build around God. We also can't use predestination as a way out, as an escape hatch or a crutch to move through the world without requiring anything of us. God's free gift of grace in our lives demands change in us. It reshapes us. It reclaims us. We can no longer live as we were before. We are on a lifetime journey into the fullness of God. This Grace claims us and shapes us over and over and over again in our lifetime. It's not a once and done sort of thing. God is always offering grace and love to us, and we are always called to respond. The key is that our salvation is not dependent on our work. Our work is a response to God's love that predates us, that exists in our lives even before our lives began. Salvation, predestination is a gift of grace. It is God's choice to be gracious to us despite what we've done or left

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undone. Most importantly, God doesn't leave us where God found us. When we think about it in this way, predestination is a notion that can, like it did for Calvin, bring some comfort and some peace.

So now that I've given a little bit of a theology lecture, Paul would say what then are we to say about all of this? What then are we to say about these things? At its very core in our text from Romans 8, God's predestination of us is a message of good news. It's a message of God's amazing love for us and God's desire to be in relationship with us. It is also not ours to control. If God is sovereign, God doesn't need our permission to offer grace to anyone; and, most importantly, we don't have to like it. It is my hope and my sincere belief that when I cross to that other side and I stand before the throne in glory, there will be people and spirits and souls there that will shake me to the core, because what I can see is so small compared to what God's love can encompass and the love and grace that God offers to everyone everywhere freely. Who am I to say that standing before the throne of God anyone can say no in the face of that kind of love? Predestination sets us free. It sets us free from looking for salvation inside of ourselves. It sets us free as a gift and a task, because, like Christ, we are called and sent into the world to be a light for the world, to include those who are excluded, to fight for those who have no voice. When we are called and saved by God, we are changed, because God frees us from all the things that bind us. That's what Paul is saying in Romans. God frees us from the hardship and distress and the persecution and peril and famine and the sword. God frees us from the powers of the world that attempt to control us, from death and life and rulers and angels and what's happening now and what might be happening in the future, frees us from power and height and depth. God sets us free. And if God sets us free God wants us all to be free. We are free to work toward God's holistic vision of a peaceable kingdom, a new Heaven and a new Earth where sorrow and sighing and weeping are no more because nothing can separate us from God's love, not our action or our inaction not our belief or our unbelief not anything that is beyond our control. God loves. End of story.

And because God loves us, God calls us to love the world.

May this be so in our hearts and our minds this day and every day. Amen.