

²⁶ 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 sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And 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. ²⁸ We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. -Romans 8:26-28

Picking a theme text for something like Synod Assembly is a strange experience. A room full of pastors and church leaders meet and over the course of a couple of hours talk their way around an idea until it sharpens into something concrete. When the Assembly Planning Team met last November it was looking for something that spoke comfort and assurance to our collective anxiety about the Bishop election and the current and future state of the church. It needed to be succinct. It needed to be memorable. It would be nice if there was a song to go along with it. Romans 8:26-28. Easy. Until it became time to write a sermon on such a short chunk of scripture chosen for such a specific purpose.

Every year on the first day of Homiletics (Preaching) 110 when Dr. Thomas Rogers of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary takes roll, explains the syllabus, fields questions, and then says these exact words. "Lutherans don't proof-text." Actually, he says it twice, each time followed by a long pause and prolonged eye contact with each and every student in the room. He then goes on to describe how tempting it is to use scripture to say something specific. From the very first moment he teaches his students both the danger of removing a verse from its' context and the frightening frequency with which it is done. He takes time over the following sessions to teach every student the beauty of tracing arguments by following the bread crumbs of connective words so that we could see and appreciate the whole. And, he calls them to preach in a way that lets the scripture speak, rather than using scripture to affirm their words. In doing so, every student of his learns that while a verse or verses may seem particularly poignant or powerful, they almost always are more so when returned to their place in the larger whole.

This moment feels really important. Our friends and family have gathered from across our beautiful state to conduct the business of the Synod and elect our next Bishop. And, it is tempting to dwell on this moment as if it stands outside of time as the most significant of moments. But it, like our scripture, is part of a larger and more beautiful whole. By the time that Paul gets to the Spirit's intercession with sighs too deep for words to express he has been creating the most beautiful and cohesive theological argument of his career for eight chapters. And, if you follow the bread crumbs of "therefore" and "then" and "but" back to chapter 1 you realize that as significant as the moment is, it is part of something still much larger and more beautiful:

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."-Romans 1:16

And, if you keep reading after the Spirit intercedes you quickly realize that this is not the end of the story. As Paul sees it, there is hope when we find the courage to live lives worthy of the gospel and when we seek unity for the sake of the mission that we share (Romans 12). As I see it, the same is true today.

When you piece together the breadcrumbs of David, Susan, Bill, Jeff, and Andrea, Elizabeth, Mark, and H. George, "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust", Call to Common Mission, the LCA, the ALC, 1988, and 1517, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther, and Mary Magdalene, a beautiful story emerges that has led to this exact moment. But, in doing so, I hope you also realize that the story is bigger than this moment and it will go on. We will go on. And, when we do, our message will be the same as the Apostle Paul. The power of the gospel is salvation for all who believe.

So, please, by all means find comfort and assurance in knowing that the Spirit intercedes even when we are without words. Take solace in knowing that God is working the Holy Spirit's purpose towards good for those who believe. Pray for those who gather and the servant we elect Bishop. But, most of all, remember that the power of the gospel is salvation for everyone who has faith and neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor proof texting, nor Synod Assemblies, nor Bishop Elections, nor anything else in Creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.

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