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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
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Romans 8.26-39
Matthew 13.31-33, 44-52

Unworthy Adversaries

“If God is for us, who is against us?” –Romans 8.31

There’s a notion that gets around from time to time: that life is supposed to be easy for Christians. According to this theology of positive thinking, the Christian’s link with God through Jesus Christ pretty much guarantees cosmic smooth sailing. One of the verses often used to bolster this view is found in this morning’s epistle lesson:

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. (8.28)

The standard interpretation goes something like this: If you’re right with God, then your life will cruise along easily and you will be a happy person. An unfortunate side-effect of this rosy, cheery theology is that if your life *isn’t* going smoothly, then clearly you are out of favor with God, or at least failing to make the connection the way that you should make it.

This side-effect alone would be cause for grave concern, for it has the potential of heaping large doses of guilt and gloom on believers. Because it brings high expectations for worldly happiness, it can even lead to depression and dejection when these things fail to materialize. This is indeed a great irony, for a theology and philosophy of life that is intended to make people feel happy ends up making them feel unhappy and worthless.

But there is a problem with this “life is easy for Christians” philosophy that goes much deeper than its emotional side-effects. Such a view of the world is clearly contrary to the teachings of scripture, even to the verse that is most often used to support it.

“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8.28) When Paul wrote those words to the Christians in Rome, he was writing to them about the struggles and difficulties of the Christian life, not about

its cheerfulness and simplicity. His assertion was that God *works* in the lives of believers to make them more like Christ. Never did he add that the work would be easy, or that the life of a person being so changed would be without difficulty. He wrote about human beings—the whole creation, in fact—groaning to be set free from bondage to decay.

What Paul realized, and what preachers of optimism so often miss, is that in this life of ours we are faced by a constant barrage of *enemies*. Though Paul talks a lot about future glory, his description of the Christian present reads more like the report of a wrestling match than it does of a tea party. Life is a battle. As you can no doubt tell, I stand firmly with Paul against this age's preachers of optimism and ease. His reading of reality simply fits better with what I've seen in my experience and with how I understand the theological drama of the world's redemption.

So who are these enemies we face? Let's try to get a bit more specific. Sometimes our enemies are other people. This is not a pleasant topic for polite Sunday morning conversation, but let's face facts, it is true. From time to time, we all bump up against other people who do not wish us well, people who, in fact, wish to do us harm. It can be physical harm, emotional harm, our harm to our reputations. Now, Christianity may dictate some things about how we are to view these people or how we are to respond to them, but our religion never says that we won't have them. (Actually, it promises that we will.) These enemies are most likely to pop up in the places in our lives where we are investing the most emotional and spiritual energy: at work, at school, in the fray of town politics, even at church. Sometimes our enemies will be those people closest to us. Even marriage can become a battleground, and a well-known book on the subject of conflict in marriage is aptly titled "Intimate Enemies."

Sometimes our enemies are not other people, but rather alien forces that seem to be working for our destruction. Disease is the first one that comes to mind here. Anyone who has struggled through cancer or some other progressive disease knows that the term "battle" is indeed the proper metaphor and that the casualties along the way can be brutal, as one glimpse of hope after another is thrown aside by the latest setback. Other physical problems, chronic

conditions and the such can also be our enemies—stepping in to foil our plans at every turn. Other powers or conditions, outside our bodies, can also be our enemies. Economic forces, government policies, world events—all of these things can have an impact on our everyday struggles to live lives of faithfulness and joy.

One final enemy cannot be left off of this laundry list of life’s foes. This enemy is potentially the strongest. This enemy knows us well. This enemy is as intimate as they come. This enemy is ourselves. Once we turn our destructive gaze and intentions on ourselves, there is no external enemy who is more effective. We can blame ourselves, knock ourselves down, and beat ourselves up—all without the slightest help, or even notice, from anybody else. We even try to cut ourselves off from the means of salvation, or as Paul says, “we do not know how to pray as we ought.” (Romans 8.26)

If our experience is at all similar, yours and mine, then this discussion of life’s enemies has certainly brought some very real examples and memories to your mind. The question now is: As Christians, where do we go from here? What do we do about these enemies?

The Bible’s response, as presented in Paul’s letter to the Romans, is grounded in two fundamental truths—one practical and one theological. These two profound truths are tied together in one remarkable verse: “If God is for us, who is against us?” (Romans 8:31)

First the practical truth. Whenever we face an enemy, we must make an evaluation of the strength of the enemy as opposed to the strength or resources that we can bring to the battle. What does my enemy have? Who are his allies? What do I have? Who are my allies? These are the sorts of questions asked by someone considering battle.

It is at precisely this point that Paul’s theological truth joins up with his practical truth. Paul knows two things for sure: that there is only one God, and that in Jesus Christ that God has shown us his favor. It follows from this that no other enemy is—in any ultimate sense—worthy of a challenge. The only possible worthy adversary is God and that God has already self-identified as our partner.

Paul's ideas don't free us from the struggles of life. They acknowledge them, but cast them in a new light. As Christians, we *will* struggle. We will have enemies. But ultimately, they will not prove worthy adversaries:

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. –Romans 8.38-39