

A PEARL OF GREAT PRICE

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Proper 12A

This Sunday we get several famous passages. Our gospel includes the verses that were left out of the middle of last week's readings. These contain several pearls of wisdom or pearls of great price. I was reminded of a conversation with a spiritual director who asked me, "What is it that is of such great worth to you that you would sell all you had, just to possess it?" Now maybe I should ask that question and just sit down and let you ponder that for the next few minutes. And I encourage you to think and pray about that over the next week.

However in doing that I would be avoiding a topic that causes many people great problems. Our Romans reading contains two wonderful pearls, but for me and for many people there is a real clinker in the middle of today's passage. I use the word clinker on purpose for that is a piece of rock that is left over when coal burns. It just sits there and will not be consumed. A clinker that most find hard to understand, has vexed theologians for years and will not go away.

First one of the pearls. "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." Or alternatively the Message translation: I'm absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely *nothing* can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.

This passage is read at funerals as often or more often than any other. This pearl grants us comfort that no matter what happens in this world or anywhere else that we are promised to never be outside of the reach of the love of God. In times such as we live in today this promise is one of great comfort to many. This is an image of God large enough to transcend anything we can imagine and even things we cannot imagine to stay united with us. This is an image of God in keeping with what we are looking at in our Wednesday Lawn Chair Theology series.

The clinker for me is the middle of this passage. Every time the subject of predestination comes up in EfM, an adult class or just in conversation I find that I get really uncomfortable. Not only do I get uncomfortable, but most people who consider this seriously have a disconnect between what they believe about God and what this says. Because the way most people understand predestination is that some of us are elected by God to get the goodies and others are doomed from the start. Now what does this say about God? What kind of God is willing to create some humans to be condemned to hell forever with no chance just because they got sent to the wrong side of the room before they were born?

Now this simply does not fit with an image of God that is huge, awesome and above all loving of everyone. A God whose love cannot be separated from us. Our book discussion group this summer has been looking at this topic of how big is your God. We are encouraged by the author, who is a Jesuit, to think beyond the concept of a God who only loves some to a God who loves all. Fr. Coutinho is trying to encourage us to move to a higher level of understanding of openness to a large wonderful loving God. One who scatters the seed of love everywhere with reckless abandon. So what are we to do with this passage from Paul that seems to be very exclusive and restrictive?

I was carefully reading multiple translations when I hit on something in this passage I had never noticed. Rom. 8:29 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.

For those he foreknew. Is there anyone anywhere in the world whom God does not know? Think back to Psalm 139 from last week.

Psa. 139:13 ¶ For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

15 My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

16 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.

The Psalmist certainly does not place anybody outside of God's foreknowledge. Other parts of this psalm speak of God knowing our rising up and our sitting down. No matter where we go God is already there waiting for us. Even when we try to flee, God is still there. Yes there are people who flee the love of God. There are people who deny God exists, but that is their choice not God's. I guarantee you that God is waiting there for them when and if they ever decide to turn back to God. You can run but you cannot hide is what this Psalm says.

So for me this means that we are all predestined, we are all created to love God and to be loved by God. We do have a choice and that is ours as to what we do with this invitation to relationship. We as Christians have the benefit of having Jesus as the ultimate symbol of that love of God for humanity.

So now as I look for a unitive view of religion where God blesses, God loves everyone, no exceptions I find a challenge to how to pray for this. In a world as deeply divided often by people claiming to love God, but hating others I find I have no words. I have no words but a great pain in my soul over what I see done by people of all faiths in God's

name. This is where the final pearl comes into play and that is the opening lines of this passage.

Rom. 8:26 Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. 27 He knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God. 28 That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good.

Just as in the psalm, God knows what is in our hearts. God knows the pain, the unborn prayer waiting to be expressed. Even when it is only a deep sighs and the groans for a hurting planet. Yet ultimately what God desires is that we desire God. In that deep and profound love there are no need for words.

So you see we really have not two pearls and a clunker, but three great pearls of great price. Maybe even three pearls worth all that we have.