**Moving Forward** Romans 8:18-27, 31-39

Well, here we are. Back worshipping together in the sanctuary after 18 months away. I imagine that some of you began to wonder if this day would ever come. We might be feeling excited, maybe a little nervous, a bit anxious and unsure perhaps. I know that as I prepared to preach today, it felt like I was writing my first sermon all over again! I was nervous!

But today IS a day to celebrate! A new beginning.

And so maybe you are wondering why I chose this scripture; one that is often heard at end-of-life celebrations.

Well, simply put, it’s because Paul’s letter to the Romans is considered the most commanding explanation about “the gospel of salvation by grace through faith.”

It’s all about faith! And faith is most certainly what we have needed to get us through the last 18 months.

Faith that one day we would be back here together again!

When Paul is writing his letter to the church in Rome, he is writing to a somewhat divided group of believers. The Christian church in Rome had been started by Jewish believers who had likely been converted during Pentecost. But, during the reign of the emperor Claudius, many Jews had been expelled from Rome for preaching the gospel of Christ in synagogues. They only returned when Claudius died, and they found that their beloved Christian church had become increasingly Gentile in their absence. There is clear division and an evident tension between Jew and Gentile believers. Paul’s letter was a message of about keeping *faith* in Christ.

It can be hard to have faith sometimes.

When the pandemic was declared in March 2020, I know that we were all afraid. We couldn’t imagine the possibility of a deadly global virus in the 21st century. People made references to the black plague and to the Spanish flu – but really? Was it possible in the 21st century with all our advances in medicine?

We breathed a sigh of relief as vaccines were developed, and maybe we relaxed a little too much as the first outbreak led to a second wave, and then to the third, and now to a fourth wave with various new variants. In Canada alone we are currently experiencing 4500 new cases daily.

World health statistics tell us that there have been 219 million cases of COVID worldwide, and 4.5 million deaths since it began!

It is hard to have faith when we hear these numbers.

And as well as the tragic loss of life, there has been drastic loss of employment. The world economic forum estimates that globally, 114 million people lost their jobs due to the pandemic lockdown.

Yes, in some parts of the world there have been wage subsidies, and some relief funds to help. But statistics in the US alone report that there were 18 million households that did not get enough to eat, and 11 million renters behind in rent.

And these figures were more prevalent among Black, Latino, and other people of color - reflecting long standing inequities and systemic racism.

Mental health disorders have also been on the rise since the outbreak of the pandemic.

If you are a parent who have had a child at home, I don’t need to tell you about the effects of the lack of social contact in your child’s development.

Or if you are a senior living alone, you understand the rise in loneliness and anxiety.

A recent report claimed that in March 2021, one in five adult Canadians have experienced depression, anxiety, or post traumatic stress in the last 18 months.

It seems like a jumble of numbers, I know. But these are real people, with real stories. Stories of that Paul describes in his letter with words like *‘suffering’*(v18) *‘longing’* (19) *‘bondage’* (21) *‘groaning’*(v22) and ‘*waiting’*(23).

They are stories like the ones that you and I have. Afterall, we have **all** lost something during Covid.

From 2016 to 2020 I was studying for my M Div. at Atlantic School of Theology. It was a lot of work being a mom of a then teenager, a full time Minster, and a full-time student. Sacrifices were made by my family for me to go to Halifax every summer for 6 weeks. I breathed a sigh of relief as I wrote and defended my final thesis in February 2020, and I was looking forward to graduating …. And then … the pandemic hit. Yes, I graduated still, but it really was not the same receiving my certificate and the various awards in the mail, without the chance to gather with my colleagues to celebrate in person. I felt cheated! It is something that I will never get back.

It may seem insignificant compared with other losses, but we all have our stories of loss. Perhaps for you it was:

* not being able to gather with family and friends at Christmas or Thanksgiving
* not being able to hold a newborn grandchild until many weeks later
* not being able to visit a sick relative or friend in the hospital
* not being able to surround yourself with loved ones at an end-of-life celebration
* not being able to simply gather with friends to have coffee or play cards

We all have our stories of loss.

But Paul reminds the Romans, and us alike, that even though the whole created order awaits redemption from bondage, we can be assured that God does intervene to sustain and redeem us in both our cosmic and our personal struggles. He writes: “*For in hope we are saved*”(v24).

Hope!

That is something that we have had to hold onto for the last 18 months.

Hope for a vaccine.

Hope for a decline in numbers.

Hope for an improvement in the economy.

Hope that schools and universities can fully reopen.

Hope that we can visit loved ones again soon.

We don’t know when we will be ‘back to normal’, or what that will even look like again. But as Paul reminds us, you cannot ‘see’ hope.

He writes:

 “*Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we wait in hope for what we do not see, we wait in patience.”*(v24-25)

We wait in hope for what we do not see.

And that, my friends, is FAITH.

And, how do we do that? How do we have that faith when everything around is crashing in, when numbers rise, when we feel such immense loss and bewilderment?

Well, it’s really quite simple. We don’t have to do it alone!

God in God’s inifinte love for us has given us a comforter to intercede for us – the Spirit!

Paul writes:

*“The Spirit helps us in our weakness …. The Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”* (v26)

Sometimes when we are hurting so much, when we are grieving for everything that we’ve lost, then it is just too difficult to put it into words.

But the Spirit can help us name our fears and our anxieties; it can help us name the pain in our hearts.

And so today, before we move forward to celebrate the new tomorrow, let us take a moment to allow the Spirit to bring our stories of grief and loss before God. We all know that the process of grieving is important part of being able to move forward.

So, let’s pause a moment (MUSIC INTRO BEGINS)

I invite you to quietly tell the person next to you what loss during Covid you grieve the most. Or just sit in quiet prayerful meditation, and name your loss to God in your prayers.

The choir will quietly sing the first verse of More Voices 84 a few times – feel free to join in quietly, or just meditate on the words.

*In you there is a refuge, in you we find our peace.*

*When all we know is chaos may our trust in you increase.*

*In you there is a silence, in you our minds are clear.*

*When all we have is discord may your quiet draw us near.*

It feels good to come before God doesn’t it!

It feels good to know that God is with us, whatever the future may hold.

It feels good to know that we are not alone.

The last 9 verses of our scripture reading today, is a crescendo of rhetorical questions and assurances about the invincible love of God.

In 9 short verses, there are 16 references about God’s Divine faithfulness.

We are reminded that NOTHING can separate us from the love of God.

 “*Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword?(v.35) …. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come …. Nothing can separate us from the love of God(v38)*

What wonderful words of hope.

Words of faith.

These are uncertain times.

I don’t know when we will be able to worship without masks;

when we will be able to sit closer together without marked off pews;

when we will be able to share in hospitality after church.

I do not have a certain answer for you – but in these times of uncertainty, there is one thing that we can ALL be very certain of:

 – *NOTHING SEPERATES US FROM THE LOVE OF GOD*

Theologian Stephen Westerholm writes:

“*In Paul’s vision, encounters with distress, hunger, danger, and death cannot … determine human destiny. The decisive confrontation must be with Divine love. It surrounds, sustains, embraces all. It offers all a home.”*

And so today, let us celebrate in that message of hope.

Let us dream of a vision for the future.

And let us allow God’s hope to lead us into tomorrow, and to guide us as we move forward together.

With that in mind, please join with me as we sing verse 2 of MV84, with joyful celebration.

*In you there is a vision, in you we learn to dream.*

*When all we see is dessert my you be our living stream.*

*In you there is a future, in you we find our way.*

*When hope has shed its brightness may you show us a new day.*