

Rev. Lisa Schrott  
August 20, 2023  
Romans 8: 26-39  
Belonging to God: Chosen and Called for a Purpose

Throughout the summer we have been hearing scriptures that embrace the call to be in community, to recognize that through the love and grace of the triune God we are bound together as a people. Over the next few weeks we will be transitioning into a fall sermon series that focuses more specifically on aspects of our mission here at PCO. We will be walking through our mission statement with intentionality as we begin a strategic planning and visioning process. This morning I am beginning that transition by a focus on what it means to belong - more specifically what it means to belong to God - for it is through belonging to God that we belong to each other.

Our mission statement opens with these words ... “As members of The Presbyterian Church of Okemos, we believe that in life, in death, and life beyond death, we belong to God.”<sup>1</sup>The theology underlying this mission statement has its roots in the apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans, including our scripture passage this morning. These words may be familiar to you for this scripture is often incorporated into our Prayer of Confession and Promise of the Gospel, and it is often heard in funerals and memorial services, as there is much beauty and comfort in the words of reassurance from Paul. Hear now these words from Romans chapter 8:26-39.

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 groanings too deep for words. And God, who searches hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. 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. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son but gave him up for all of us, how will he not with him 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 affliction 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 victorious through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor

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<sup>1</sup> The full mission statement can be found at <https://www.okemospres.org/our-mission/>

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. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

As part of the ordination process in the Presbyterian denomination, pastors-to-be take a series of ordination exams covering knowledge of scripture, use of Hebrew and Greek languages, theology, worship practices and polity or church governance. This was one of the questions on my theology ordination exam... .

You go to the home of Eleanor, a member of the congregation you serve. Eleanor has recently been hospitalized for a serious illness but is now at home recuperating. You notice that she seems unusually withdrawn and reflective. When you comment on this, Eleanor says: I have been a member of the church for more than 60 years. I have always loved the Lord and tried to be a good Christian. I have served the church in a lot of ways, and I think I have been a good person. But for the first time in my life, Pastor, I am afraid of dying. How can I be sure I'm saved?<sup>2</sup>

For the exam, I was asked to write an essay discussing a Reformed understanding of salvation, using at least two of these resources: the Scriptures, classical theology, contemporary theology, and to describe how I would respond theologically to Eleanor.

To answer this question, I began with scripture from Romans. Paul's letter to the church in Rome is the closest thing we have in the church to a manual of theology -a capstone of what it means to be a follower of Christ. Paul writes it towards the end of his life, around 57/58 CE, some scholars thinking this is the last of the letters written by Paul himself. Unlike others of his letters, he is not writing to a church he birthed or even visited. His knowledge of the church in Rome is secondhand, from reports of others who are part of the Roman community who follow Jesus, and from colleagues in ministry who have shared with him the tensions in this growing faith community.

Much of the letter to the Romans addresses how the promise of being united with God - of the fulfillment of belonging to God - is accomplished through faith rather than adherence to the laws laid out in Hebrew scripture. For Paul, the gospel - the good news - of Jesus Christ is that our salvation is through the grace of Jesus Christ - his death on the cross and his resurrection - a witness that sin and death do not have the last word.

Getting back to Eleanor, our friend from the theology exam, Paul's letter to the Romans provides the theological language for the assurance of our salvation – or to use the word Paul uses – our election – the understanding that we are chosen by God. *If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son but gave him up for all of us, how will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.*

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<sup>2</sup> PC(USA) Theology Ordination Exam, April 24, 2015.

In the book of Romans, Paul lays out a pathway of redemption for us as followers of Christ, with God at the helm. God actively accomplishes the redemption of all things in creation. Paul's focus is on the work of God. We hear this in verses 28 – 30, a very theologically dense passage. "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 his Son, in order that Jesus 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.

Paul's focus is on the work of God, on the shape of how it is that we belong to God. We belong to God from the beginning. We belong to God in the present. We belong to God always, and into the future. Using hefty theological terms, Paul relates that God foreknew or predestined, called, justified, and glorified us to be conformed into the image of Christ.

I recognize the language Paul uses can be a bit of a barrier to understanding this passage. So I want to look at the text in a bit more detail, because the soaring language at the end of this passage is even more beautiful when it is seen as the culmination of an argument Paul is making. Paul wants us to be assured that we are freed from worry about our ultimate relationship with God, and it is in this freedom that we can serve as Christ's ambassadors, as Christ's body on earth.

In the Presbyterian tradition, much of our understanding of Paul's words come from the 16th century theologian John Calvin. Calvin began from a vantage point that we are all sinners. He wrote that although we were created good in the image of God, our pride and belief in our human self-sufficiency were part our sinful nature. But this sin is not the end of the story because our sins are forgiven, and we are made right with God, through our faith. This is from God's initiative – not our own. We recognize this process – known by the theological term justification – each Sunday in our communal prayer of confession, where we acknowledge the ways we fall short of living the life God has called us to. Following that prayer, we have an assurance of forgiveness – the promise of the Gospel. We do that every week, because we recognize that we are both, **and at all times**, sinners and forgiven people. We are "justified" - made righteous- not because of our good works or by living a blameless life. Our sins are forgiven because of grace through faith in Jesus by the action of the Holy Spirit. From Calvin's perspective this event of justification happened when Jesus was crucified and resurrected. It happened once and we received this gift. We don't have to work for it, it is freely given to us.

We also hear in this passage from Romans another theological term that often causes us concern or at least confusion - predestination. Sometimes the term "election" is used – those who are predestined are known as the elect. The idea that God has foreknowledge of those whom God has called often evokes the question about free will, as well as questions about those who might not be part of the elect. Those are important questions that I will tackle on another day. This morning I want to highlight why Calvin thought predestination was a freeing

idea. Calvin, and other theologians, argued that a belief in predestination meant that we didn't have to spend our days worrying about whether we were "saved" or not. That freed us up to live a life in Christ in the here and now. We can live out our call to be Christ to others – to serve – because we don't have to spend our time worrying about belonging to God. God already declared that nothing could separate us from his love.

*“And those whom God predestined God also called, and those whom God called God also justified, and those whom God justified he also glorified. What then are we to say about these things?”*

What then are we to say about these things? In the face of all the world throws us at - nothing can separate us from God's love. This is not a prize we have won - not the luck of the draw - not something we have achieved. We don't get to lord it over others. It is a gift - and it is a gift we share. We have been claimed by God. We belong to God and that claim on our lives pushes us outward, not inward. Yes - our individual salvation is important, but it is not the end of the conversation. As they say in the improv world – we respond with “yes and.” Yes, we have been assured that we are chosen – that we belong to God and nothing can change that **and** because of that assurance, we are called to be Christ to others.

In the words of preparation, I have included a quote from the contemporary theologian the Rev. Dr. Shirley Guthrie, who eloquently sums up this notion of “yes and”: “We too are chosen not instead of, but for the sake of the world's outsiders. We are chosen not to escape from a godless and godforsaken world with all of its sinfulness and suffering, but to be sent into it and live for it. ... We are chosen so that those who are excluded from the benefits of God's loving justice and just love may be included. For we too are chosen not to be served, but to serve, to take up our crosses as we follow the Chosen One of God who was crucified because he cared for all of the wrong people.”<sup>3</sup>

The message we hear from Dr. Guthrie was beautifully articulated in our first hymn this morning *Come Live in the Light*. We sang that “We are called to act in justice, we are called to love tenderly, we are called to serve one another, to walk humbly with God.”<sup>4</sup>

“As members of The Presbyterian Church of Okemos, we believe that in life, in death, and life beyond death, we belong to God.” Our mission at PCO springs from this belief that we belong to God. 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. Let us embrace this promise of belonging to God. And because we belong to God, let us embrace our call to love and serve as faithful followers of Jesus Christ, as people chosen for a purpose. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Shirley C. Guthrie Jr. *Christian Doctrine. Revised Ed.* Westminster John Knox Press, 1994; p140.

<sup>4</sup> David Haas. *Come! Live in the Light!. We are Called.* *Glory to God Hymnal #749.* Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.