

**Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A – Romans 8:26-39**  
**St Andrew's Episcopal Church - Sedona, AZ**

***Predestined to Love***

*“The kingdom of heaven is like...”*

What is the kingdom of heaven like? How will we know when we see it? Matthew's Gospel tells us that Jesus continues to tell his followers about the kingdom of heaven through parables. So perhaps, the kingdom of heaven is like a parable because it is hard to enter into, and if you keep trying you might be able to get glimpses of it throughout our earthly lives. Perhaps the kingdom of heaven is like a parable because there is no logic to how or who “gets into” heaven. Parables usually have a moment that sounds so hard to believe it seems absurd. And maybe that's the point. Even though Jesus uses familiar imagery to describe the kingdom of heaven, the Divine Realm is so unlike our current culture and our current contexts that there is no way that we will experience the kingdom of heaven on our own and through ordinary human tactics.

Granted those of us who live in this spectacular Red Rock Country seem to have found a foretaste of heaven on earth. But life is not without its challenges even in this corner of God's beautiful creation. We are not exempt from family arguments; we are not invulnerable to financial adversity; we are not immune to illnesses or disease; we are not exempt from human pain and suffering. The Good News is that we are not alone in life's trials and

tribulations; we are not alone in striving for the kingdom of heaven. And perhaps today, the Good News is that there are more stories in Holy Scripture for us to ponder than another handful of parables. I know that some of you may have been looking forward to the challenge of wrestling with more Jesus' confusing teachings. And invite you to do that at coffee hour, or in the comfort of your own home this week. But for now, I'd like us to consider what the kingdom of heaven is like from another perspective.

In Paul's Letter to the Romans we are reminded that "those whom God predestined God also called; and those whom God called God also justified; and those whom God justified God also glorified." Predestined. Justified. Glorified. "What then are we to say about these things?" Predestined. Justified. Glorified. Certainly, there has already be quite a bit said about these things by John Calvin from the Church's Reformation-era and Karl Barth over the last century. These and other theologians have encouraged contemporary believers and non-believers to consider the fullness of our relationship with our Triune God, particularly as we reflect on our place in the kingdom of heaven.

The concept of "predestination" is probably not one we talk about much in the Episcopal Church, at least from a Calvinist point of view in which human beings speculate that God "freely and unchangeably ordained whatsoever comes to pass." Or that an elite group is offered the eternal destiny of

salvation through God's grace. I imagine that these theological arguments make some of us cringe and squirm in our pews. Such theologies have been twisted, reshaped, and reinterpreted into fear-based doctrines that distill our relationship with God into dualistic categories. Categories like the ones we have heard explained away in the parables over the last few weeks in which there will be weeping of gnashing of teeth. Categories that do not invite us to ponder how parables encourage expansive thinking and inclusive action. Categories that attempt to predetermine the wideness of God's mercy and grace.

Perhaps as we ponder the limitations of this predetermined way of thinking, we might consider the second word that Paul uses to encourage us in faith: Justified. Being justified implies that something or someone needs to be defended, validated, or excused – such as humanity and our tendency to make regrettable choices. Justification also implies that our actions not only have consequences, but that they will be judged by God, and the angels will separate the evil from the righteous. Here again, we find ourselves stuck in the mire of dualistic thinking, and grasping for a more life-giving perspective. Contemporary theologian Frederick Buechner writes that “The One who judges us most finally will be the One who loves us most fully.” Could it be that God's judgment is about reconciliation? Reconciling people to themselves, each other, and to God? Could it be that God's judgment is about restoration?

Restoring us to right relationship; restoring our vision of who we are and whose we are? Restoring our memories of God calling us into being – being made in the image of God, being part of God’s beloved family, being guided as participants in manifesting and rejoicing in God’s kingdom. Restoring us to Love itself—to give love, to receive love, to be love.

Could it be that we are predestined to be reunited in love with love—God’s divine love? Could it be that God’s original intent was and continues to be that we know in every cell of our being that we are loved? How is it that God is glorified by enacting vengeance and punishment? How is it that God would desire to destroy that which God spoke into being and declared good? How is it that God will abandon or disown God’s beloved children? It is difficult to image that a threatening God could invite willing participation in fulfilling God’s purpose. Could it be that we are “projecting” insufficient and inaccurate human ideas of who God is; projecting a theology that is tainted by our own fears, doubts, and insecurities?

If instead we believe that God desires that we be reconciled to love; that God intends that we be made whole and wholly God’s own; that God dreams that humanity would embody the perfect love made known in Christ – might we continually glorify God through loving acts of kindness, patience, and forgiveness? Most certainly, we are reconciled through the grace of God, not just on the Final Day of Judgment. But we are continually invited into

reconciliation whenever we acknowledge our own brokenness, and our desire to return to love. Whether we act in self-destructive ways or inflict harm on others, God yearns for God's people to be transformed, renewed and re-created as reflections of Christ in the world. We may not know how to do work through our human weaknesses, but God does not intend for us to accomplish restoration on our own. Being raised again to Divine likeness is ultimately in God's power. And God noticeably reveals Godself through human form, human lives, and human history by the grace of God's Holy Spirit.

Paul reminds us that God promises to be with us always, especially in times of great vulnerability. "The Spirit helps us in our weakness...and that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words; [and that very Spirit] intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. " The Holy Spirit groans with us in our suffering. The Holy Spirit sighs within us; She breathes new life through us and for us, enabling us to have peace of mind, soul, and heart; guiding us to rest our restlessness in God's peace; empowering us to make God's love more fully known through our open hearts, minds, and hands; and directing us toward the ongoing manifestation of God's kingdom according to God's will. For our life with Christ is written upon our hearts through God's unfathomable unconditional love. God's love endures and we endure through love and with love and for Love. For nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

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