

July 30, 2023

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

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St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Romans 8:26-39

*...in all these things we are more than conquerors
through him who loved us.*



In January 2019, shortly before the Super Bowl, a fascinating article appeared in the Harvard Health Blog, an online publication of Harvard Medical School. Written by Dr. Robert Schmerling, a medical school professor, the article was provocatively titled, “Can watching sports be bad for your health?” Now, far be it from me in this sports Mecca of Boston, to throw any shade on watching athletic events—especially with the Patriots first preseason game only eleven days away (not that I’m counting or anything). However, don’t shoot the messenger, but Dr. Schmerling’s answer is a resounding “yes”: watching sports can harm your health. The doctor writes that spectators have been linked to all kinds of negative health events, from a 2017 report which found that the heart rate of hockey fans in Montreal doubled when they watched their team play, to a 2018 study published in the American Journal of Cardiology which reported a “substantial increase” in cases of cardiac arrest for Japanese men watching the Japanese World Series. (Notably, Japanese women who also watched these games exhibited no such increase, which as my Japanese wife might point out, only goes to show that women clearly have their priorities better ordered than us men.)

Be that as it may, the data is clear that we tend to get really involved, emotionally, even physiologically, in whether our favorite team wins or loses—so much so that our physical and mental health can suffer significantly as a result. Why is this? Why do we care so much about winning? Why are we so invested in which team wins and loses that it literally causes us medical distress? And is there, finally, any way out of this high-stress mindset? Not just in terms of sports but also in our lives more generally, is there any way to calm the competitive drive which wreaks havoc on our health, any way to get beyond that need to win, to succeed, to conquer, so that we might find a fuller, richer, deeper, more truly satisfying life?

I’d like to suggest this morning that Paul’s nebulous phrase “more than conquerors” takes us to that very place of deep peace and full life. But how does he do this? What does he mean by this phrase? Who is “conquering” or “more than conquering,” and what relevance does that have for our lives today?

Day-in and day-out, most of the time, we operate according to the logic of the zero-sum, win-or-lose game. The logic and rules of this game can be seen in most kinds of sporting events, where one team wins and one team loses. There are only two possibilities, and at the end of the game, you’re either on the positive side (you win) or on the negative side (you lose). All the benefits (whether points or prize money or some other honors) accrue to the winner, while the loser heads home with nothing, except perhaps a sense of shame or humiliation. In our passage this morning from Romans, this zero-sum game is conveyed by all the examples of suffering Paul lays out before he mentions the phrase “more than conquerors.” He asks, for example, “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, 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.’” Just about all of these examples of suffering are all-or-nothing, zero-sum game, kinds of experiences. Let’s track this

closely, because this is key to understanding what Paul means by “more than conquerors”:

You can't be a little bit naked, or a little bit starving, or a little bit killed. You are either persecuted or you are secure; you are either stripped naked or you are clothed; you are either starving or you have enough to eat; you are either killed or you are alive. Each of these situations mirrors, in a grand way, a typical sporting event (like a football game), because there is a very clear all-or-nothing outcome: the winner is the person who remains clothed, well-fed, alive; the loser is the person stripped naked, starved, killed. Now importantly, in this zero-sum game, to be a loser would be the equivalent of being conquered, and to be a winner would be the equivalent of becoming the conqueror. The one who conquers nakedness, in other words, is the one who gets to be clothed; the one who conquers the threat of persecution is the one who gets to live securely. In Paul's time and still today, those who conquer are the worldly elite, the politically and economically powerful, those who use their influence, resources, and wealth to ensure that in the great zero-sum game of their lives, they come out on top. While the less fortunate, less skilled, less connected, less resourced typically end up on the losing side—suffering hardship, peril, persecution, and even death. The conquerors are those who use what they have to ensure that they don't suffer hardship, peril, persecution, or untimely death; they are those who “succeed” in the game of life.

So what would it then mean for Paul to claim that he has become “more than a conqueror” through the love of Christ? Paul here is off our conceptual maps because he seems to be saying that through Christ's love he has been given a way to stop playing the deadly, zero-sum game. What would it mean to be more than a conqueror in the life-and-death game of conqueror and conquered? It would mean to be so free and secure that the all-or-nothing options offered you by the game no longer interest or concern you, no longer rob you of sleep, no longer disturb your deep inner calm. Put more specifically, to be “more than a conqueror” in the contest between conquerors and conquered, winners and losers, persecutors and persecuted, well-fed and starved, clothed and naked would mean to be so free, so secure that your peace, your equanimity remains steady—like the flow of water along the bottom of a deep, deep river—regardless of which side of the contest you ultimately land on. As Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians, “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him [Christ] who gives me strength.”

Paul argues, in other words, that Christ's love for him personally relativizes every other experience in his life: if he's being persecuted or lacking food or robbed of clothing, he knows that he will always have the love of Christ, and so he—deep deep down—remains content. By contrast, if he's enjoying a period of security, with nourishment and abundant provisions, he's free from clinging to them, from growing excessively attached to those blessings, because he knows that, more important than any of that, he has the love of

Christ, and so he remains humbly, peacefully content. Put differently, Paul shows that he has been totally liberated by the living Christ's unconditional love for him, such that he is no longer blown about by life's circumstances. He's free from striving, as so many of us desperately do, to be on the side of the winners; he's free from fearing, as so many of us hauntingly are, of suffering the lack, the pain, the shame of the losers. Paul has found the way out of treating life as a zero-sum game, or rather he would say that Christ has shown him the way out, and Paul tells us plainly at the end of our reading what that way is: "the love of God in Christ Jesus" for you and for me which literally nothing, not even death itself, can take away. "The love of God in Christ Jesus" which enables Paul not to conquer, not to win the game of life, but to "more than conquer," to be so secure and free that he doesn't have to win in order to know joy.

When Paul sits down to watch the Patriots, or when he goes through hardship, or when he lies on his deathbed seconds away from the end of his life, unlike the hockey fans in Montreal or the baseball spectators in Japan, there is no risk of him going into cardiac arrest. He is so infused with God's love for him that he doesn't need to play the high-stress, winner/loser, "are we going to conquer or be conquered?" game. Paul has become more than a conqueror: through the love of God in Christ Jesus he is totally free and eternally secure—and therefore he is able to just enjoy the game, or enjoy whatever else he is doing, deeply, fully: finally released from being so invested in being a winner and not being a loser, whether in a sports game or his career, relationships, or any of the other areas of life which we so typically divide up into winners and losers.

What would it be like to enjoy that depth of security, freedom, peace, and hope? How would your life be different if you knew in your heart of hearts, beyond any shadow of doubt, the full depth and breadth, width and length of God's unconquerable love for you? What might it look like for you to "be more than a conqueror" in your daily life today, this week? The point, I hope it's clear, is not that we shouldn't be passionate about our sports teams, or that we all need to become emotionless Stoics. No, the point is that God loves you, in Christ Jesus God loves you, personally you. While I do not wish to minimize the very real hardships and sufferings you might be going through, I do want to emphasize that God's love for you can thoroughly alter your experience of that situation, along with how you engage everything else in life: from your daily work to your favorite sports team.

Come danger, or hardship, or peril, or death itself, do not worry, do not be afraid: you and I, like Paul, are no longer in a win-or-lose game; we can rest, breathe, enjoy our deeper, "more-than-a-conqueror" freedom, and delight in the love of God which makes it all possible. Amen.