

Freedom of Choice AND Predestination Psalm 139; Romans 8: 26-31, 35, 37-39
Saint Marks UMC, Charleston WV 5th Sunday after Pentecost (July 13) 2014

Psalms 139. O Lord, you have searched me and known me!

You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar.

You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways.

Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether.

You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it.

Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me.

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.

For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well.

My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.

How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you.

Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God! O men of blood, depart from me!

They speak against you with malicious intent; your enemies take your name in vain. Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with complete hatred; I count them my enemies.

Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!

Romans 8:26-31, 35, 37-39

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those 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 among many brothers. 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 shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ...Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ...

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure 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.

We continue in our summer series of preaching on topics selected by the Worship Committee and by the congregation, in a Newsletter Survey. Today's topic is ACCEPTANCE.

Over the past few days I was blessed to spend time with my extended family. We had the first annual Brown family reunion in Fairmont yesterday. On Thursday my sister and her husband Michael arrived from upstate New Jersey to spend the time with us leading up to the reunion.

Yesterday morning, my assignment was breakfast preparation. Michael and I stood in the kitchen as I was frying the eggs. His was the first plate to be served. As the eggs got to the stage in frying where decisions need be made, I asked him how he liked his eggs.

He said, “**Just like that.**”

“**No,**” I thought. “**He must mean, ‘Right now is the stage of cooking where I want you to flip the egg.’**” But, no, I was wrong. He meant for me to take the eggs out of the skillet and put on his plate right as they were.

Now, I have seen “over easy” (the “correct” way) and I’ve seen hard yolk, but I have never served eggs to anyone in this state of “RAW” and “UNCOOKED” before. As if reading my mind, he said, “**I like them running right across the plate.**”

Well, this was just WRONG and I hated to be complicit in his eating eggs improperly cooked. This could be harmful to his health. I didn’t want him dying from undercooked eggs on my watch. Hasn’t he ever read the warning about undercooked eggs on the menu of any restaurant that serves breakfast?

And I remembered how just 36 hours, he chose for me to leave his steak on the grill for too long – way past MEDIUM RARE, which IS the way that “**God meant for steak to be eaten.**”

What’s wrong with this guy, anyway?

And somewhere along in there I remembered the words that have been a part of Methodism for over 225 years – and still a part of the *Discipline*, i.e. the United Methodist Rule Book: ***In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things love.***

These are the hallmark words of our church’s position on ACCEPTANCE OF OTHERS.

Yes, that is the topic for today’s sermon. So, perhaps, it would behoove us to hear those historic words of our denominational way of understanding life in God’s Kingdom here and now: ***In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things love.***

Hear now this song that has been Mark Stotler’s favorite for more years than he’d like to count. As soon as he saw the topical sermon schedule, he suggested that this song fit perfectly into the theme of Acceptance.

<song interlude>

I was not much worried about the development of this sermon until near the beginning of the past week. Then a new idea was planted in my brain – *no, rather, came up and smacked me alongside the head.*

There is the issue of ACCEPTANCE of other people, but there is also the harder notion of ACCEPTANCE OF THE WAY LIFE TURNS OUT.

How do we ACCEPT the “STUFF” in life over which we have no control – particularly *the bad, the painful, and the ugly*?

When Jesus said “**the poor you will have always,**” was He merely accepting a reality and telling folks to not do anything about it? Well, in a word: **NO** or in two words: **HECK, NO!**

When bad, painful, and ugly stuff happens to people I care about, am I to not try to do anything to prevent such things? Am I not supposed to care?

Just what does ACCEPTANCE of *the bad, the painful, and the ugly* mean?

- Some people in life just don’t get dealt a good hand.
- Life just isn’t fair – and more so for some people than for others.

One way we try to cope with this is to blame people for their own situations. And a large level of lack of personal accountability is part of our present world.

But, blame wherever we choose (and it’s usually with THE OTHER PEOPLE that we tend to do so, not with the ones we love) the reality is that:

- Some people in life just don’t get dealt a good hand.
- Life just isn’t fair – and more so for some people than others.

Geez, here again, it seems to fall into my lap to stand in this pulpit and grapple with this issue in front of the flock that is wanting some answers: HOW DO WE ACCEPT STUFF LIKE THIS?

And so today’s sermon took a different twist. What answers on ACCEPTANCE of life’s unfairness, of life’s unwarranted suffering, can I give?

Then, out of the blue, the answer came to me in SCRIPTURE.

First in the psalm (139) that was our call to worship, and then in Paul's letter to the church at Rome.

In Psalm 139, we are reminded just how much we are known by God. God knows every word on our lips before we even utter them. It certainly does not mean that God causes us to say these things. I'm absolutely positive I have said many words that God had rather I had not. (Don't take my word for it; ask my wife and children!)

But, in the continuous spectrum of time, by which God is not bound like we are to only seeing past and present – God knows all these things.

No one knows us better than God, not even ourselves.

And then – right after those two wonderful faith foundations of Romans 8:26 and 8:28, I discovered a third faith foundation – in Romans 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 among many brothers. 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 happens to the ones that God foreknows?

- Conformed to the image of Jesus.
- Called by God.
- Justified by God.
- Glorified by God.
- Period.

And **who is NOT foreknown by God?**

Psalm 139 – NONE of us.

We are talking here about ***the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob***. That's how God is so often referred to in the First Testament: ***the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob***.

Abraham – the Indiana Jones of Genesis, who had more adventures and excitement, more courage and foibles, more leadership and progeny, than almost any person in the Bible.

Jacob – the trickster, the gamester, the sly dog, the one with strange human relations, the one with powerful dreams (remember Jacob’s ladder?) The one who wrestled with the angel of God and prevailed. The one whose name was changed to Israel – the progenitor of the most famous country on the planet even today.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

What about **Isaac** – almost made into a human sacrifice by his own father, and the rest of his adult life can be summarized as “the butt of jokes, victim of scoundelhood of his whole family”?

Name the good thing that happened to him, in his life. Talk about someone who got dealt a lousy hand, from all we are told!

But it is ***the God of Abraham, ISAAC, and Jacob.*** Equal billing. Equal loving. Equal calling, justifying, glorifying.

- We all get to make choices.
- We all are subject to forces beyond our control.

BUT we are also **ALL**

- Foreknown by God
- Conformed to the image of Jesus.
- Called by God.
- Justified by God.
- Glorified by God.
- Period.

It **doesn’t give me an answer** to the question of “How can I ACCEPT things that happen.

BUT it does give me a relationship that I can trust.

- There are so many things that go on in life that I cannot explain.
- There is so much pain in life to which I am called to do all I can to remediate.
- There is so much bad, painful, and ugly stuff in life that I could cry myself to sleep over every single night.

But I can ACCEPT it all with a PEACE that passes all understanding, as I *grow in my relationship with God* to know in my heart the LOVE which guides God in all dealings with us, and by which I am convinced that ALL God's children are

- Foreknown by God
- Conformed to the image of Jesus.
- Called by God.
- Justified by God.
- Glorified by God.
- Period.

I'm learning that this ACCEPTANCE does not come as HEAD KNOWLEDGE but only comes in HEART RELATIONSHIP. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.