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Pentecost 11, August 13, 2023

“More Than Conquerors”

Read: Romans 8: 35 - 39

Anyone here ever face persecution because you're a Christian? I'm going to be pretty surprised if more than one or two people raise their hands this weekend. One of the reasons we've been inviting you to receive “The Church Around the World” is to help you learn what is happening to many Christians, because our situation is the unique one.

Many Christians face persecution each day. Sometimes, it's obvious. Government agents taking pictures as people enter their churches. On Monday, they come to their jobs to tell them they no longer have a job.

Sometimes, it's more subtle. Perhaps you don't get into the best schools or you can only get a menial job or your children are harassed by their classmates. At other times, people rise to power on the basis of how well they persecute Christians.

The president of China, President Xi, used to be an administrator in a province. He made his mark by persecuting Christians. That got him attention and he rose in the ranks. Now he is trying to do the same thing on a national level. The church in China is under great stress and persecution.

Now, one would think that the church probably is becoming smaller because who would want to be part of something that means you'll face persecution? Yet, that is not the case. Most report that there is remarkable growth of the faithful in China. One person observes that part of the answer for that growth is that, “People in China feel very dry. They are looking for spiritual answers.”

Those people, willing to take the risk to provide those answers, often face persecution. One such person is a Kindergarten teacher. She was hauled in and questioned about what she was doing and why she was doing it. She was teaching little children, and anyone else who would listen, about Jesus. She risked everything for the sake of the Gospel.

Throughout the history of the Christian Church, whenever it has been persecuted, it has grown stronger, rather than weaker. When people put themselves at risk for their faith,

they hold to it all the more strongly. They have a higher allegiance to God's mission of making disciples than to the state's mission, no matter what the cost.

The question is why do they do that? How can they withstand the danger, the risk, the persecution that comes to them because they are followers of Jesus Christ? Paul gives us the answer in Romans 8: 37, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us."

It is not just in persecution that we become conquerors. Listen to the list Paul gives us. I'm reading from the New Living Testament because I think it's a little bit easier to understand "can anything ever separate us from God's love? Does it mean He no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry or destitute or in danger or threatened with death?"

Paul was well acquainted with all these things. He is writing to new Christians in Rome, who are also experiencing them. Paul wants them, and us, to understand that these things are the normal part of life for those who follow Jesus. Paul does not want them to think that because they are suffering, God no longer loves them.

And here's the thing, we don't want to sugarcoat that truth for people who are considering following Jesus. We don't want to tell them that following Jesus means that life will be easy. There will be a party every night and they won't ever have problems in their life. If we do that, when the troubles come, and they will come, they will be defeated by them, rather than trust God's promise.

Even those with great faith have to face that reality. The great reformer, Martin Luther, lost his son. His wife Katie shouted at him at the death of the boy, "Where was God when our son died?" Martin replied, "The same place He was when His son died. He was there watching and weeping."

Just as God bought our redemption by the crucifixion, He can make sure that the final words of our lives are not about suffering, but about victory. God is love. If we trust that promise, nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from His love.

That love does more than rescue us. It changes us. Many years ago, a sociology professor at John Hopkins University assigned his class to interview 200 boys from the inner city. "On the basis of your findings, predict their future. Shocked at what they saw and learned in their neighborhoods, the students estimated that 90% of the boys interviewed would someday serve time in prison.

Twenty years later, the same professor asked another class to locate as many boys as they could and determine what had happened. Of the 180 boys they could find, only 4

had ever been in jail. How could the original interviewers have been so wrong? They found one common denominator. Over 100 of these men remembered having the same high school teacher, Miss O'Rourke, who had been a tremendous influence on them.

The investigators found Shiela O'Rourke in a nursing home in Memphis. When asked for her explanation, she was puzzled and replied, "All I did was love every one of them." That's exactly what Jesus does. He loves us with an unconditional love that breaks down the barrier of sin between us and God. We are reminded, Jesus died while we were yet sinners. That's the proof of His love.

We want to stop looking at how to run from suffering and instead look to the hope found in Jesus. That's where we'll find the key for how to live the victorious life. It is in Jesus that we become completely victorious. Not only do we become victorious, we become conquerors.

How could you expect anybody to possibly prevail through suffering, persecution, poverty, danger or hostility? It all seems impossible, unless you know that Jesus loves you. Through God's love, we have a guaranteed promise that we will prevail.

It doesn't say we won't suffer. In fact, Jesus warns us that suffering is part of our life as followers. And even the danger of death surrounds us, yet the love of Jesus reminds us that even that old enemy has been conquered. Not even death can separate us from His love. That call is to obedience, the obedience of faith, which is the ultimate goal.

The ultimate example of faith and perseverance is found in the life and ministry of Jesus Himself. Jesus endured rejection, betrayal and the agony of the cross. Yet, He willingly embraced His mission, demonstrating unwavering faith in His Father's plan. Through His resurrection, Jesus triumphed over death, sin and the devil, providing hope for believers to face trials with perseverance.

Elisa Morgan in Christian Parenting tells of her eleven-year-old daughter, Eva, who was distracted as she was tucked into bed one night. Mom told her about a friend's teenage daughter whose hair was mysteriously falling out. Mom encouraged her to pray for Amy, which she did with these simple words, which touched mom deeply, "Jesus, please hold Amy's hair on her head."

As the doctors experimented with different treatments, Amy continued to lose her hair. Eva continued to pray the same prayer, "Jesus, please hold Amy's hair on her head." Six weeks later the doctors determined Amy had alopecia, an extremely rare disorder where the hair loss is unpredictable but can be complete and permanent. When mom told Eva about the diagnosis, and explained it, Eva took hold of mom's hand and closed her eyes.

This time her prayer was different, “Dear Jesus, if you won’t hold Amy’s hair on her head, would you please hold Amy?”

That’s exactly what God does. Paul says, “We are more than conquerors through Christ who loved us . . . nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” That’s how God holds on to us!

When going through trouble, knowing the final outcome makes all the difference. That’s why Paul wrote: “In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. I am convinced that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” None of the things we face have any power over us, if we don’t give it to them. When we place ourselves in the loving hands of our loving God, we have nothing to fear.

Therefore, as Christians, we should anchor our faith in God’s promises, trusting in His faithfulness and leaning on His strength. As we do, we will witness the power of unwavering faith, finding hope, restoration and a deepened relationship with our loving, Heavenly Father. When we place our faith and trust in God, we are more than conquerors through His love.

Count me in: Knowing you are a conqueror through the love of Jesus, what difficulty will you choose to face?