

Convinced

I am convinced...How would you complete that sentence? I'd be quick to say that I am convinced:

That chocolate is a health food, along with ice cream.

That a baby's giggle is one of the holiest sounds around.

That—given the chance—Steph Curry and I would be fast friends.

That tears are exhausting and healing.

That an ocean breeze is close to the breath of God.

My list tells you a bit about me, about what I like, what I feel, what I treasure, what I count on to be true. You can also probably tell that my list was written on a good day.

In a sermon preached at the National Cathedral in February, writer Michael Gerson spoke about his faith and about his struggles with depression. Two weeks before he was scheduled to preach, he was hospitalized for depression. In the depths of his disease, he had his own list of convictions that told him:

You are a burden to your friends.

You have no future.

No one would miss you.¹

While he later came to know his convictions were unfounded and wrong, the force of the disease was and remains strong. It is easy to be convinced that he is not worthy, that we are not worthy, that the world around us is headed in the wrong direction, and that what we do here and what we believe makes little to no difference.

In this chapter of his letter to the Romans, Paul shares a bit about his convictions, too. In this chapter we get a deep and thorough view of what it is that Paul truly believes. Paul understands that the Roman church faces extreme and extended hardship. He does not minimize the terrors they face as a community determined to worship Jesus as Lord and Savior. To profess Jesus as Lord is a political claim. If Jesus is Lord, Caesar is not. To make this choice, to serve Christ above everyone and everything else is to take a dangerous political stand.

¹ Michael Gerson, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/02/18/i-was-hospitalized-depression-faith-helped-me-remember-how-live/>

With this declaration comes persecution in ancient Rome and throughout the Roman Empire. So Paul recognizes the real danger in claiming Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. He does not pat them on the head or promise sunshine and roses. After all, it is a danger Paul faces himself.

So he does not gloss anything over. No, he speaks of weakness, and of our inability in the midst of our struggles to find the words to pray. In the verses that come just before ours he speaks of hope, hope that cannot be seen or touched, because after all, hope that can be seen is not hope. By definition, Christian hope is hope that lies just beyond the horizon. And he boldly declares that:

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.²

We know. Yes, on our best days we do know this. On our best days we are convinced that God can pull redemption out of any situation—not that God is sending disaster and hardship our way, but that God is in the midst of us, in the midst of it all working for our redemption, working toward the new creation. But what about the other days? The days when yet another mass shooting takes lives of people simply doing their jobs, days when children are separated from the parents because of their citizenship status, days when tornadoes rage and fires burn, days when the dementia makes her forget who you are, days when the addiction makes him steal from his own father, days when the pain runs so deep that you begin to wonder if God even cares at all. The pain we face is not the same as the struggles the Romans faced, and yet “hardship, . . . distress, . . . persecution, . . . famine, . . . nakedness, . . . peril, . . . [and weapons]” are still real threats for us and for all of God’s beloved children.

Gerson says he has friends who see the work of God in the beauty of creation, in the colors of birds and the power of love a parent has for a newborn child. Gerson sees the transcendent God at work in these things, too, but he also credits his faith and the church for sustaining him in and through his darkest times. He recounts a time in 2002 when he found himself dissolving in tears and relief at the sight of a sculpture at the Cathedral depicting the Prodigal son collapsed in his father’s arms. In that moment he promised himself and God that he would be a better man, that he would stop focusing on himself so much of the time. He continues:

² Romans 8:28, NRSV

I have failed at these goals in a disturbing variety of ways. And I have more doubts than I did on that day. These kinds of experiences may result from inspiration ... or indigestion. Your brain may be playing tricks. Or you may be feeling the beating heart of the universe. Faith, thankfully, does not preclude doubt. It consists of staking your life on the rumor of grace.³

It sounds almost like Paul, doesn't it? *Staking your life. I am convinced.* Why is it so difficult to trust that rumor? We are quick to believe other rumors, the ones about conspiracies and dire plots, the ones that tell us the worst about a person or an institution. Why is it so hard on so many days to believe this "rumor of grace" is true?

In a moment we will welcome a new member into the Christ Presbyterian community. In the words we will use to make Leigh's membership official, you will hear me say, "remember your baptism and be thankful, and know that the Holy Spirit is at work within you."⁴ Know that God's Spirit is at work in you. Trust the rumor of grace. Be convinced that the God we meet in Jesus Christ is at work in the world taking the mess that bombards us every day and creating something new and whole. These are not easy challenges; these convictions are not our default drive, at least left to my own devices they are not my default drive. And that is why we need this community to help each other trust the rumor to be true. It is too hard to trust it all on our own.

Last week, we were drawn back to the font where we are reminded of God's love poured out for us in Jesus Christ, "grace that interrupts the consequences of our actions," we were told.⁵ Today we are called to the table, the place where we are welcomed to the joyful feast of the people of God. Paul is convinced that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, but on so many days, God can seem far away and far removed. And yet in this sacrament, in this meal we are invited to take and eat. In this meal we are reminded that in Jesus Christ God comes to us in the flesh, breaking down any division between the holy and the human. "Take, eat, this is my body given for you," Jesus tells his disciples. Paul insists that he is convinced that nothing, nothing in all creation—not even the very best we can experience or the worst we can endure—can separate us from God's love. And as we share the gift of the bread and the cup, as we feast on this meal—one

³ Gerson

⁴ From the PCUSA 2018 *Book of Common Worship*

⁵ Bono, as cited in *Under Grace*, preached at CPC on May 26, 2019

we do not earn, one we cannot replace—we are strengthened for our work out in God’s world. In this world God may feel faraway, but rest assured it is the very world God so dearly loves and has never abandoned. And God relies on us, yes, us, to live lives that give others a reason to believe that the rumor of grace is true. So as you prepare to take this meal, I invite you to think about and maybe even write down what you are convinced of here and now. Or maybe you need to ask God to convince you again that you are loved, that you are worthy of being saved. Because the rumor is true. For by the grace of God I am convinced that neither hatred, nor inadequacy, nor arrogance, nor racism, nor fear, nor violence, nor dementia, nor cancer, nor addiction, nor depression, nor apathy, nor life, nor death, nor anything in God’s creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. And I am convinced that in the midst of our detours and our doubts, our shortcomings and our overreaching, our God wants to convince us that nothing, not one thing can separate us from God’s love made flesh in Jesus Christ. So come, share in the joyful feast given to us at this table, bask in the grace poured out for you, and know that you are immersed even now in the love that knows no bounds.

Thanks be to God. Amen.