

July 30, 2017  
Romans 8:28-31; 5:18  
Destiny versus Fate  
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I'll get to our New Testament text in a moment but first let me say that today's sermon spotlights Paul's concept of "God's election." It goes hand-in-hand with the idea of "predestination" Now this may sound about as appealing a sermon topic to many of you as watching paint peel. However, at one time, this doctrine was the one with which Presbyterians were most enamored – and most identified – whether we liked it or not – and usually we didn't – because it's the doctrine for which we were mocked. In fact, the Presbyterian nickname "the frozen chosen" is a direct result of this traditional theological emphasis and a particular stereotype associated with it.

The stereotype was that of a rather dour group of Protestants who believed that God "elected", or "chose" or "predestined" some for eternal salvation in Christ, and others for eternal damnation. Presbyterians were accused of believing that everything humans did was predetermined and it was only by God's grace that some were chosen for salvation. Presbyterians were thus viewed as a rather gloomy, fatalistic bunch who stood aloof from the rest of the world – hence the name, the "frozen chosen."

This is rather unfortunate because all of the great doctrines of the church, including that of predestination arose originally out of very real experiential dilemmas that people of faith at one time faced. One needs to remember that this emphasis on election by Calvin came out of the Great Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Although it is hard for us to imagine, before this time in European history, it was simply taken for granted that one was *born* a Christian.

But as Calvin began to earnestly struggle with discipleship based on Biblical faithfulness, he had to deal with passages from the gospels where Jesus speaks of God separating the wheat from the weeds, or the sheep from the goats at the time of judgment. And he had to deal with *Paul*, who practically coined the term "predestination" in his letter to the Romans.

But perhaps more importantly, Calvin had to deal with the reality that some in the church seemed to be faithful examples of discipleship while others seemed to care less. And the fact was that it was Calvin's experience that those who seemed to care the least were the official leaders of the medieval Catholic Church. The idea of God's election was therefore originally intended to give comfort and assurance to those who disassociated themselves with the medieval church in order to join the new Reformed movement.

According to Calvin, being a chosen disciple of Christ was not determined by a priest or an institution, it was determined by God. Calvin therefore made a distinction, which although biblical, was radical for his time. It was a distinction between the *visible* church in the world made up of a *mixture* of the 'sheep' and the 'goats', the 'weeds' and the 'wheat' and the *invisible* church of Christ made up of only the 'sheep,' made up only of the 'wheat' chosen by God. Further, Calvin emphasized that the assurance of salvation was a gift and that the proof was in the fruits of a faithful Christ-like life. It is with this in mind that we turn to today's scripture

which comes from Paul's epistle to the Romans chapter 8 verses 28-31 and chapter 5 verse 18. Listen:

Romans 8:28-31

<sup>28</sup> We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> 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 within a large family. <sup>30</sup> And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. <sup>31</sup> What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?

Romans 5:18

<sup>18</sup> Therefore just as one man (Adam's) trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.

*The words of God for the People of God. Let us Pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, Our Rock and Our Redeemer, Amen.*

Some years ago, on a hot summer day in South Florida, a little boy decided to go to the old swimming hole behind his house. In a hurry to dive into the cool water, he ran out the back door, leaving behind shoes, socks and shirt as he went. He flew into the water, not realizing that as he swam toward the middle of the lake, an alligator was swimming toward him. The boy's father, working in the yard, saw the two get closer and closer together. The father dropped what he was doing and he ran as fast as he could toward the water, yelling to his son at the top of his lungs as he went.

Hearing his dad's voice, the little boy became alarmed and made a U-turn to swim to his father. But just as the boy reached his father, the alligator reached the boy. From the dock, the father grabbed his little boy by the arms just as the alligator snatched his legs. This began an incredible tug-of-war between the two. The alligator was huge and extremely strong, but the father was much too passionate to let go.

When the alligator relaxed its jaws, ready to get a better grip by clamping down harder, the father's grip was so strong and true that it snatched the boy completely free causing boy and father to tumble backward onto the dock, and the alligator to give up and go elsewhere to seek easier prey. Remarkably, after weeks in the hospital, the little boy fully recovered. His legs, however, were extremely scarred by the vicious attack. And on his arms were more deep scars where his father's fingernails had dug into his flesh in an effort to hang on to the son he loved.

A newspaper reporter who interviewed the boy after the trauma asked if he would show him his scars. The boy lifted his pant legs. And then, with obvious pride, he said to the reporter, "But look at my arms. I have even better scars on my arms. I have *them* because my daddy wouldn't let go." <https://www.truthorfiction.com/alligator/>

I stand before you today as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ just like this little boy because my heavenly daddy wouldn't let me go either.

And it is the same for every one of us who have assurance of God's calling – elected by God for assurance of salvation and service. I believe this story does a better job of describing the biblical concept of God's election through Christ for salvation and service than any theological exposition I know. It means God's got a hold of you and is not going to let go – no matter what.

Yes. The primary actor and rescuer in our story was most definitely the father. The Father, like Christ, seeing that his son was in trouble did three things. He:

1. Moved toward his son,
2. Called his son,
3. And when his son came to him, he grabbed onto him and held tight.

But you will note that there were also some crucial actions the son took. He:

1. Got himself into trouble
2. Recognized his trouble by hearing his father's call,
3. Responded to the call of his father by moving towards him as fast as he could and finally,
4. He sang the praises of his father in such a way that the good news of his salvation could be heard the world over.

God's election is like that.

Note, if you will, that the title of my sermon today is not "Predestination" or even "Election to Salvation and Service" but rather, "Destiny versus Fate." The reason for this is that I believe the difference between understanding what happens in one's life as one's destiny and viewing it as fated is the difference between those, who like that boy recognize and respond to God's call and those who (for whatever reason) do not.

"Fate." If you think about it, it's a word that is bandied about a great deal. In describing the death of someone – particularly the untimely death of that someone – people are often heard to say that he or she met with his or her "fate."

Or maybe you've heard it said that toddlers go through the *fated* terrible twos or that teen-agers go through a *fated* rebellious stage (neither of which is necessarily true).

At any rate, what is meant by this is that there are things in life that are bound to happen and there is no way to escape them. It is no accident that the word 'fatal' contains the root 'fate'. Connected to the acceptance of fate is a commensurate attitude of fatalism.

Actually, if you will recall, the origin of the idea of fate comes directly from Greek mythology. The fates were three sister goddesses whom the Greeks believed determined human life and the events that would make up that life that were inalterable. These sisters were thought of as weavers who all shared just one eye. Clotho was the first sister. She spun the thread of life. Lachesis was the second sister. She measured the thread or decided one's lot in life. And finally there was Atropos. She carried the shears that cut the thread at the appointed hour. These decisions of the fates were arbitrary, capricious and inalterable – even by gods thought to be more powerful.

Now compare this ancient Greek understanding of ‘fate’ (still at work in the world today) with the Christian concept of ‘destiny.’ Destiny has its roots in the New Testament and is associated with human cooperation with the will of God. To speak of destiny in this *gospel* sense is to speak of a divine purpose for one’s life. It is no accident that the word ‘destination’ has ‘destiny’ as its root. To have a destiny is not only to have a definite place to where one is headed, but a place that promises to complete one, make one whole, accomplish one’s God given calling.

So to recognize God’s election to salvation and service is to accept one’s destiny and to begin cooperating with God’s purposeful plan of salvation and service for one’s life. Like the boy of our story, it is to hear the father’s call *away* from one’s *fate* with the alligators and to begin moving as fast as one can toward one’s *destiny* on the shore. When we do this, we recognize as Paul says, that “...If God is for us, who (or what) is against us?”

In this way, I believe we can choose to cooperate with our destiny and find joy in the particular service to which we are called, or we can spend our lives fighting it, attempting to go our own way. As Christ puts it, “All are called but few are chosen.” Or again as Paul puts it, God’s action in Christ has led to “life for all.” The important phrase here is ‘for all’. And one has only move toward that destiny with faith – faith that God will do the rest – that God *will* grab hold.

Now I’ll admit that none of this explains why some people keep swimming toward the alligators when the arms of their loving father await them on the shore. But to tell you the truth, Calvin and Presbyterians as a rule have been satisfied to leave that one up to God and instead to emphasize that ‘all’ part. After all, to recognize and begin moving towards one’s destiny is ultimately a gift of grace – a gift of grace that is its *own* priceless reward. And this is where the service part comes in. For if we have truly accepted our destiny in God, how can it be possible for us to stand in judgment of one who fights it? The fact is we all have fought it at one time or another.

Thomas Merton, the great twentieth century mystic and contemplative once said, “Even the best of men...perhaps especially they, when they return to a frank self-awareness, confront themselves as naked, insufficient, disgruntled, malicious beings. They see their stubborn attachment to the lie in themselves; their fear of truth and of the risks it demands.” --Thomas Merton, in Esther de Waal, ed., *A Retreat with Thomas Merton: A Seven-Day Spiritual Journey* (Canterbury Press Norwich, 2011), 40.

It’s not our job to judge others. It is our job to recognize the truth about our own souls and the risks that truth demands. And once that truth has taken hold it is then our job (again, like that boy) to simply share the good news of our salvation – to proudly display the scars we bear because God’s truth had a hold of us and would not let go....

God’s act of salvation in Christ was indeed for everybody. But accepting that act and living out of it is not easy. Just because we accept our destiny in God doesn’t mean that we will make it through this life without the scars both from alligator bites and those that come from God’s grip on us. On the contrary, living one’s life out of Christ practically guarantees it. But being able to point to God’s saving presence in the midst of the scarring is the difference between living the abundant life promised by Christ and just existing.

Are you struggling right now? Are you suffering? The question is not why? “Why?” is a question for the fates. It can’t be answered. The question for a chosen disciple of Christ is ‘How’? ‘How’ is a question that God *can* help you to answer.

So the question for you today is: “How might your current struggle be related to your destiny?”

Let us pray.

Gracious God, we so often go through life thoughtlessly, taking you and your call for granted. And soon the alligators have us surrounded. Give us the power of your Holy Spirit to move without haste toward your loving voice that we may receive the fruits of your salvation and there proclaim to the world, “How Great Thou Art.” In Christ’s name we pray, amen.