

# Sermon for The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

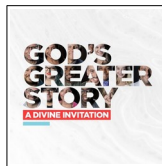
**Date:** September 6, 2020

**Location:** St. John's Lutheran Church, Austin, MN

**Old Testament:** Deuteronomy 7:6-9

**Epistle Reading:** Romans 8:28-39

**Gospel Reading:** Matthew 13:44-52



**Sermon Text:** Romans 8:28-39

**Sermon Title:** In love God Rules over Ruins

**Introit:** Psalm 92:1-4; Antiphon: Psalm 92. 5

## Hymns:

LSB 645 – Built on the Rock the Church Shall Stand

LSB 713 – From God can Nothing Move Me

LSB 746 – Through Jesus' Blood and Merit

LSB 760 – What God Ordains is Always Good

## Liturgy:

Divine Service I, p. 151

## Songs:

The Battle Belongs to the Lord

Our God is an Awesome God

Holy is the Lord

Beulah Land

Lord Reign in Me

## Liturgy:

Creative Worship



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## **Text: Romans 8:28–39**

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? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;  
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

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.

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Grace, peace and mercy I pray would be yours in Jesus' name. Amen.

If you go to Coventry Cathedral, in England, and look toward the altar, you will be overwhelmed by the massive tapestry that rises before you. It depicts Christ enthroned in glory. A pale and wounded Jesus is seated on a throne. Surrounding Him is a band of gold that branches out into four corners. In each corner a symbol of one of the evangelists.<sup>1</sup> These four evangelists give us one vision. A vision of the wounded Christ ruling over a fallen world. The sheer size of the tapestry makes it overwhelming. It is about the size of a tennis court. It took twelve weavers three years to complete. It's visage is overwhelming, but it also overwhelms in another way. It overwhelms us with the love God has for us.

What Graham Sutherland did with thread in this tapestry is what the apostle Paul does with words in his letter. Today we explore one of the most beautiful parts Paul wrote in the book of Romans. It is where he wove together all of God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with all of creation, with death and life, angels and demons, present and future, things seen and unseen. All of God rules over all of creation in love. That's what the apostle Paul wants us to know. Paul takes us to the end of God's greater story, which is really not an ending at all but a new beginning, a glorious re-creation of all things, and the final victorious revelation of God's people as more than conquerors in His love.

When we read the words of the apostle Paul something happens. It is not as if we are standing there at the foot of this tapestry looking up at an overwhelming image. It is as if Paul has invited us into the tapestry and from there has asked us to turn around and see what Jesus sees. Paul wants us to see the world through the eyes of Jesus,<sup>2</sup> because Paul knows that vision will change your life.

When we come to church we come with a limited vision of God. We look at God through the experience of our lives and that limits what we can see. We think things like: Did He answer my prayers this week? Did He give me strength to deal with work? Did He give me strength to handle the kids? We are always trying to lock God into a box that we can handle. One that is small enough for us to fit Him into our lives. Paul wants to change our perspective. Paul wants us to experience a revelation. We don't fit God into our lives. God brings us into His life, His love and His rule of the world. Paul asks us to pause, for just a moment, to see the world through the eyes of Jesus, who has risen from the dead and is ruling in love. So right now lift your eyes and your hearts to see the world through the eyes of Jesus. Let Paul bring you to our God who is, in love, ruling over ruins.

1 The authors of the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John

2 **Matthew 9:36** – When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

## **I. The Ruins of This World:**

Paul's words remind us that the world is in ruins. The devastation of creation outside and the deviation from God within. Paul names those things people fear would separate them from God. Tribulation, distress, and persecution. Famine and nakedness. Danger and sword. These are not just words for the apostle Paul. He is naming the reality of what he has seen in his own life and ministry. He is, as he writes, traveling to Jerusalem, carrying a gift for the poor who are suffering under famine. Paul has been in prison. He has suffered tribulation and danger. He knows how the world fights against God's people. The evils he deals with are not only those that stand outside the Christian Church. Paul knows, sadly, there is evil that flows from within. He himself stood there as Stephen was stoned and he approved of the execution. Paul knows this hatred and abuse that comes from the inside. He knows he stands there guilty before God, accused of his egregious sin.<sup>3</sup>

In this section of his letter, Paul invites us to bring it all to Jesus. Bring the evil that stands outside of you, the forces that threaten to destroy you, the lies, abuse, gossip and hate. Paul invites you to bring these to Jesus, because God will not be mocked.<sup>4</sup> Paul asks you to be honest about the evil within. He asks you to stand before God, suffering, from a world in ruins, and from our own sins. The greed that causes you to turn a blind eye to others' pain. The calloused heart that dismisses suffering and simple Christian care. Paul asks us to gather it up and place it before God's throne. Paul asks us to bring that before God because Paul knows what God our Father, through His Son, is bringing to us love unbounded.

## **II. God Ruling in Love:**

While we bring all of our evil to God, God brings all of His love to us. In fact our evil is all God demands from us. That is the one of the great mysteries of our Sovereign Lord. He want a humble and repentant heart, not gift, money and mammon.<sup>5</sup> Paul knows that God is ruling over the ruins of this world, but in love.

If you were to go to Coventry Cathedral and stand there below the tapestry, looking away from it toward the church, it is amazing what you would see. You would see a church in ruins. Coventry Cathedral is a church built on ruins. On November 14, 1940, the city of Coventry was bombed. It experienced the blitzkrieg, the nighttime horror of Hitler's Luftwaffe in World War II. In one night this cathedral, this place where people had worshiped for almost 900 years, was

3 **Romans 3:23** – All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

4 **Galatians 6:7** – Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.

5 **Psalms 51:16-17** – You will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

reduced to charred wood and crumbled stone, with a columns of smoke rising from the earth.

Jock Forbes, a stonemason at the time, looked over the ruins and saw two ancient timbers, charred by the fire, had fallen to the ground in the shape of a cross. These timbers were taken and placed on top of a pile of rubble, making an altar before a wall of shattered stone. Behind them, they placed the words: “Father forgive.” Then a new cathedral was built, extending off the old ruins. This tapestry hangs at the altar of that new cathedral. From it, Jesus sits enthroned, facing the ruins of a fallen world. There, in front of Him, are the seats where people gather, and behind them the ruins of the old cathedral.



Separating the people from those ruins is a wall of glass. On it are etched images of angels and saints. Figures from the Old Testament, from the New Testament, from the martyrs of the past and the present. Jesus, enthroned in glory, looks out over a fallen world. His vision, however, is one of hope. He sees the angels and archangels and all the host of heaven. He sees the saints and the prophets, the apostles and martyrs, the ways in which His church has triumphed throughout the suffering this world would bring. Through that glass, in the ruins, are the charred remains of a cross, a place where God’s love was made visible for all the world to see.

This is what the apostle Paul wants to share with you. Jesus sees you. He sees you living in a world ruined by the Fall. You live among lairs filled with hate and those who would tear souls to shreds. At times, you are the victim of suffering. This world would tell you to give up, to walk over the ruins, to forget about God, and just move on. Many do, but Paul tells us to stand firm. To stand in the midst of all of this and to stand before God, in your sin and in your suffering. Why would Paul ask you to do that? Because Paul knows the One who rules over all: Jesus. Paul knows that this Jesus, who sees all, has given all of Himself for you.

At the heart of it all our suffering and sin is that charred cross, that moment of redemption, when Jesus Christ offered His sinless life for our sinful flesh. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus defeated the powers of sin and Hell, and death

itself, and claimed us as His own. God is for you, and if God is for you who can stand against you?<sup>6</sup>

Listen to Paul. He asks:

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect?  
It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn?<sup>7</sup>

God's love spans our entire life, as Paul writes:

for those whom He foreknew, He also predestined . . .  
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>8</sup>

Not only has Christ died and risen for us, not only does Jesus hold our entire life in His hands, but He also rules over all of creation. He begins by saying

All things work together for good for those who love  
God and are called according to his purpose.<sup>9</sup>

and he closes by saying:

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.<sup>10</sup>

Paul knows that we are immersed in the ruins, but he asks us for a moment to lift our eyes and to see this vision of Jesus enthroned in glory. It is there that we find hope.

## **II. We live before God in hope:**

Hope can be a hard thing to find. Think about the cathedral. After the Coventry Cathedral had been bombed, it would have been easier for the people to look at the ruins in despair or clean up the mess and erase it from their memory. In time no one would know the difference. They would not have it. They held the groaning and the glory together in a vision of hope. They didn't walk away from the church defeated by suffering, but built a new one. Not by clearing away the ruins, but

6 **Romans 8:31** – What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?

7 **Romans 8:33**

8 **Romans 8:29-30** – 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.

9 Romans 8:28

10 Romans 8:38-39

leaving them as a reminder of suffering in this world. The ruins and the church stand together as a visible reminder that in the midst of the fallen creation God continues to rule, and His rule gives us hope.

What happened at Coventry Cathedral decades ago happens in our lives every day. Every day, we are confronted by the suffering of our world and the sins of our flesh. Listen to the news; you can hear the suffering. Look at your heart; you can see the sin. For some, the temptation is to despair. They are tempted to give up, to lose hope, to believe that God has not conquered and to try to fend for themselves. For others, the temptation is to a foolish hope. They take a passage like this one from Romans, and use it to dismiss the very real pain and anguish of suffering. “All things work together for good,” they say, and it doesn’t matter. “All things work together for good,” they say, and yet their words don’t recognize the real pain and evil in front of them. Christian life in this world is neither of these options. It is actually a paradox, a strange combination of glory and groaning. We are certain of the glorious future that God has in store for us, we know and trust that all things work together for good, but we also see the reality of suffering in this world and are moved to sorrow and compassion for those living through it. Seeing the ruins of this world, we do not give up hope. Seeing the hope of the future, we do not deny the suffering of this world. Instead, we live in both worlds, in the reality of suffering and in the certainty of hope.

At the foot of the Coventry Cathedral tapestry is an altar and, when you draw near to that altar, you experience this reality of suffering and hope. The closer you come to the tapestry the harder it is to see Christ high above you, ruling over all. What you do see, however, is what the artist placed at the very bottom of the work. A picture for those who would dare to draw near. At the very bottom of the tapestry, where it draws closest to the earth, is a cross. There is Christ crucified for all people. His figure is seen most clearly when you come forward for Holy Communion. There, as you go to the altar to receive the body and blood of your Lord, you experience both the reality of suffering, God’s suffering for us, and the reality of hope, God’s rule for us in Christ.

What the artist created with threads, what Paul created with words, we remember with song. Consider the hymn of praise in our hymnal. “This is the Feast of Victory for our God.” Imagine what this must look like to those outside the Church. If those outside the Church looked in, they would not see a feast. All they would see was a small amount of wine and thin wafers of bread, a mere taste given to the people. Yet we sing, “This is the feast.”

If those outside the Church looked in, they would not see victory. They would see people suffering. We experience the same difficulties as others in the world. We are not immune to cancer, depression, or death, and yet, we sing, “This is the feast of victory.” Why? Because we know that the victory of God has come to us in Jesus Christ. He is now present with us in His body and blood. Suffering and hope brought together here for you in love. He has triumphed over sin, death, and the devil and He rules over this world in love. Though we don’t see Him now, enthroned in glory, we know of that new creation and we rejoice in this Jesus, this one who gives us His body and blood and rules over us in love.

**Conclusion:**

This love of Christ continues, long after our feast and song is over. The apostle Paul reminds us that “Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.” Jesus is interceding for us.

Often when artists depict Christ enthroned in glory, they show Him seated on a throne with one hand raised in blessing. That is not what you see on this tapestry. Instead, you see Jesus, sitting with both hands raised upward in prayer. This Jesus who died and rose and rules over all things intercedes for you. As you make your way home, as you enter into another week, He continues to pray for you. Jesus takes your suffering and burdens, your sins and sorrows, and presents them in prayer to His Father. Nothing you encounter, nothing you bring, can ever separate you from God. Neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, 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 are more than conquerors in Jesus who rules over these ruins in love.

Amen.

**Proclaim God's Word,  
Encourage one another in faith,  
Witness to God's love and  
Serve all people**

