

God and Ice Cream
Romans 8:26-39
Calvary Presbyterian Church,
Alexandria, VA, July 30, 2017
Rev. Gene Kendall, Jr.

During my regular morning commute I walk from the Navy Memorial/Archives Metro station to my office about 10 minutes away on Pennsylvania Avenue. And walking down Pennsylvania Avenue this time of year there are of course throngs of tourists walking around, many of whom are taking selfies by the FBI building or the Trump International Hotel. And with tourists come all kinds of T-shirts with slogans on them. One that I've seen on more than one occasion has this quote, "Beer is God's way of showing he loves us and wants us to be happy"; apparently attributed to none other than Ben Franklin.

Intrigued, when I researched this quote, I've found that Ben Franklin never said it. According to Wikipedia, it is a twist off of a quote in a letter he wrote to a French friend named Abbe Morellet, Franklin wrote "Behold the rain which descends from heaven upon our vineyards, and which incorporates itself with the grapes to be changed into wine; a constant proof that God loves us, and loves to see us happy!" Apparently Ben liked his French wine.

If you were asked to come up with a t-shirt quote, _____ is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy, what would you fill in the blank with? Beer? Wine? For me... I would insert *ice cream*. Permit me to make my case, for ice cream and I have a long history together.

You see, being one of five kids, and with both parents working, time alone with my dad in my younger years was very hard to come by. But every now and then, and very often after I had been punished and was crying my eyes out in my room, my dad would come in, rub my back, and say, Son.... why don't you and I go up to the Dairy Queen and get some ice cream.

Perhaps it was a relationship repair attempt, I don't know, but it always worked. You see the Dairy Queen was about a mile away, it was outside the radius of where we were allowed to ride our bikes, and so going to the Dairy Queen with Dad was a special treat. It was one of the ways my father communicated that he really did love me. Perhaps you have similar stories from your childhood of how a parent or grandparent took you aside and showered you with their love.... just you.

Now that I am older, as much as I still harbor those warm memories about ice cream with my dad, I have had to come to grips with the hard truth of my relationship with Ben and Jerry's. Hi my name is Gene, and yes, I'm an Ice cream-aholic. Specifically addicted to Ben and Jerry's Chunky Monkey.

Last Sunday, during coffee hour, I did an informal poll with about 20 of you, asking you for your favorite ice cream. What was surprising to me, with so many choices and flavors out there, Vanilla and Chocolate still got the most votes...not one of you chose Chunky Monkey. One spoonful of that delicious treat in front of the TV always leads me to another...and then another.... and 5000 calories later, I have to admit that I have no portion control and must surrender to a higher power.

And so now, as part of my recovery program, ice cream is not allowed in the house, except on a few rare occasions when we entertain. God and Ice cream; God's way of showing that he loves us and wants us to be happy. Any other ice cream addicts in the house? Let me see a show of hands? We can all support each other downstairs at the ice cream social after this service. Repeat after me...Portion control...portion control, portion control...

When I turned to the lectionary a few weeks ago in preparation for today's sermon, I was hoping for something low-calorie...after all its summer, which in my view is a time for short sermons so we can get outside and enjoy the longer hours of daylight. But what we find instead is a text that is the theological equivalent of about 5000 calories. This text is chunky monkey, filled with all kinds of theological fat calories, and best digested a few spoonfuls at a time.

I am sure it is a familiar text to many of you who know your Bible...perhaps for some of you it's even a favorite. (Show of hands) There is some great theology in these verses...the role of the Holy Spirit; Predestination; God's sovereignty; It's all packed in here.

I've used this text many times for funerals...for it is full of God's promise and comfort in the midst of human grief. It is a text for the crossroads of life, a reminder of the bigger picture when we suffer loss... or life doesn't feel fair or just... or happy. Listen to the words again; "For if God is for us, who is against us...what can separate us from the love of God?" The central affirmation is that nothing life can throw at us, nothing, can separate us from the love of God, which is shown in Christ Jesus.

What is the context of these high calorie words? Looking under the hood of the book of Romans, scholars tell us that Paul was writing to a particular audience...a church he has never visited before. These were strangers, he did not know them, and they did not know him. Perhaps this explains why he packs so many theological calories into this letter, explaining the heart of his gospel.

First, he wants them to know who he is, what it is he preaches, and why he has apostolic authority. He is coming their way soon, so the letter helps build a bridge for his reception by the community as to what they can expect from him and vice versa.

Secondly, he needs both their moral support and their financial support as he is passing through Rome on a journey of spreading of the gospel as far west as Spain. To visit and plant churches, and he needs their financial resources to make this journey possible.

And third, Paul has gotten word that there are some divisions within the Roman churches. Most likely these include divisions between Jewish and Gentile Christians. It may even be that the Jewish Christians are returning to Rome after being expelled some years earlier along with other Jews. Jewish and Gentile congregations are trying to find ways to live together despite their different histories and customs. Sound vaguely familiar to any church you know?

We in America are having our own challenges in living together these days. Republicans and Democrats are divided. Selected Muslims are being kept out of our country, there are transgender bathroom bills and transgender soldiers now who are no longer welcome, leading to a perception that the understanding of and tolerance for diversity and difference is shrinking in our nation. It's hard for the culture wars to not to spill over into our churches. Embracing diversity is hard work. Paul knew it... and my guess is that here at Calvary, we know this...we get it...and we believe it is worth it.

And so in the early Christian community in Rome, filled with all the challenges of being a diverse community, Paul was trying to be helpful by offering them some theological calories that they could ALL digest.

So many good calories but so little time...allow me to touch on one spoonful that many of us are familiar with. The text that is on the top ten list of Biblical quotes for many folks is found in verse 28; "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." Do you know it? Do you know it by heart?

This a beautiful and powerful text ...and also a dangerous one.is It's a dangerous text because it is often lifted out of its context and turned into a religious platitude or conventional wisdom, a mamby pamby capsule of encouragement for life, a theological version of the saying that "there is a hidden good in every evil, in every cloud there is a silver lining." In my view this use of the text it is right up there with telling someone who has just suffered a tragedy or unexpected loss that it was somehow God's will and they just have to accept it.

I recognize that in the midst of grief, it is only human to want to offer comfort...but using the "it must be God's will" line is in my view really bad religion.... and if it was every used on me, I don't think my reaction would be pretty. God doesn't will tragedy, God doesn't will death, and God's doesn't choose sides for the Super bowl or the World Series. God does will us to be in relationship with him...God does will us to be good stewards of that which has

been given to us...and yes, God's will is for us to be happy. But in the midst of these promises, there is no promise that it will be easy. Some events in our lives simply don't make sense and never will no matter how hard we try. Blaming God for allowing evil to happen is understandably a very human response... and also the easy way out.

And it's a beautiful and powerful text because Paul's intention wasn't about teaching us to accept tragic events as God's will, but rather to make the strong theological proclamation of God's providence, that even in the midst of that which we can make no sense of, and would prefer any alternative to the hand we were dealt, God can be at work through benefit and disaster alike.

This past Monday night, at the regular bi-monthly meeting of a men's group that I've been a part of for over 15 years, one of our members shared some bad news. We are eight men; diverse in age, backgrounds, professions, race, sexual orientation, and families.... we rotate homes and share a simple meal before we check in with each other about the significant events of our lives, with the goal of supporting each other along the way. We've seen each other through job changes, marriages, raising children issues, surviving lawsuits, just to name a few. As I walked into the home, a member greeted me and immediately shared the bad news from his doctor about an hour before. The only words that I heard were.... cancer...and metastasized. We spent our evening processing with him this news, supporting him as he was just beginning to think through the implications of what lay ahead. This was no time for conventional wisdom...but to be with, to listen, to feel, and to talk about hope both medically and otherwise. Life at the crossroads got very real on Monday night.

It has led me to ponder all week...who will I be ...and how will I live into all that I say I believe should I get those words one day from my doctor. I also think of Senator McCain, as he lives into his recent diagnosis. Life at the crossroads, how will we show up? Not if, but when? How will we show up, and what will we draw on?

This spoonful of theological ice cream is one resource that I will pull upon...for it reminds me that the God who is at work among us is a God who is in control and who will surely bring about his intended purpose. I love the way one biblical commentary writer put it....

“ This is no passive, what will be will be God that we worship, but rather a God who is known to be active and aggressive in bringing about his saving purpose. The purpose, which God is steadfastly bringing about, is conforming us to the image of his Son; that very son who went down to death between two thieves for our sakes. That is the journey on which the sovereign God is taking us, where the itinerary is by no means only on the heights but rather in the everyday depths near which we always find ourselves. “

Ice Cream.... God's way of showing us that he loves us and wants us to be happy.
"All things work together for good for those who love God and are called to his
purpose. Who can separate us from the love of God?"

Powerful words...theological fat calories that we can all digest.... today,
tomorrow, and at the crossroads. Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God...
Now...what do you say we go eat some ice cream.