

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost  
July 30, 2017  
Text: Romans 8:28-39  
*"Our Inseparable Friend"*

There are two dogs in our household. Buddy is the older of the two and the Alpha. He is a mixed breed, fox-like in color, with the fan tail of a Pomeranian and the short legs and long snout of a Dachshund. He has a temperament like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. At home, he spends much of his time quietly sleeping near anyone willing to pet him, but the moment he sees or hears someone passing by our house, his body tenses, he rushes to a window and barks with a force that sometimes leaves him coughing and wheezing. None of our attempts to train away his aggressive traits have met with success. Buddy is what he is.

Our other dog is named Neville. We think he has the marks of the Shiatsu and Pomeranian breeds. Before we adopted him, Neville was "debarked". He is still very vocal, but his highest volume is low and breathy. I am Neville's person. He spends time with Julia and Jon too, but when I am home he follows me everywhere I let him, sticking to me like a shadow, which is my nickname for him. Neville is one of those dogs that fits the traditional canine moniker of "man's best friend." He sits with me on the couch, sleeps on my chest when I lie down, affectionately licks me, and faithfully waits for me by the door each afternoon, somehow knowing about when I should arrive home.

"Man's best friend": among creatures, dogs do fit that bill, but in absolute terms, humanity has one friend greater than all the rest. Proverbs 18:24 observes, *"A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother."* In Jonathan, the son of King Saul of Israel, David found such a friend. When, in the throes of insane jealousy, the King attempted to kill David, Jonathan risked his life to protect and preserve his friend. Blood may be thicker than water, but there is a love still surpassing the love of family.

Back in chapter 5 of his letter to the Romans, Paul extolled God's love for us, declaring: *"God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* (vs. 8) While we lived as His enemies, God made Himself our friend. God's Son robed Himself our human flesh and blood. He came right into our midst to show us His love. Jesus was no "fair weather friend." We did not return His friendship. By pride and selfishness we turned our backs on Him as true God and true man. We didn't think we needed His help, for we were confident that we were good enough, strong enough and wise enough to do things our way. Instead of turning His back on us and returning to His heavenly home in disgust, Jesus suffered our rejection, apathy and hatred. He allowed our forefathers to arrest Him, accuse Him falsely, condemn Him and crucify Him in shame. However, His passion and death were God's mysterious plan to put His love for us on display forever.

Christ, God's Son died for us. Unable to free ourselves from the evil nature that has turned us from God's image-bearers to His haters, God in Jesus set us free. Jesus stuck with us. He suffered our worst. He absorbed the punishment due us for our rebellion. When

God raised Jesus from the dead, He returned to us with good news: "You are free indeed!" Free to live with faith in God's promises. Free to obey God's commands, though not yet perfectly. Free to call upon God as beloved children speak to their dear father. "Abba, Daddy", the Holy Spirit emboldens us to cry. Free from sin's persistent pull, for through baptism, we died to sin and rose to live with God in faith and love. Free from bondage to the Law: no law can guide us without also condemning us for our sin, but the grace Jesus won for us on the cross speaks a word of forgiveness that silences the law, allowing us to rest in the strong and secure embrace of Jesus, our best friend.

Jesus sticks close to us, for He has sent His own Spirit to dwell within us. God the Holy Spirit convinces us that Jesus loves us, He helps us to live in that love by repenting of our sin and relying on His grace to live our lives as God's servants to other people. The Spirit assures us that we belong to God, and He helps us to pray and hope and believe in God to order life for our good even when we suffer troubles, hardships and persecution like Jesus did. When we finally walk through the valley of death's shadow, still our Friend will be there to receive us and keep us secure for the day of resurrection.

And so, to conclude his great sermon of salvation, Paul asks, "*What then shall we say to these things?*" Though that question seems to invite us to respond, Paul can't help himself; he is a preacher after all. "*If God is for us, who can be against us?*" he exults. Jesus, our Lord and Brother sticks by us and stands for us. He reconciled us to God; made us to be His children again through grace. Jesus rose from the dead, ascended to heaven, rules in His Father's name with all His authority over heaven and earth, and He intercedes to Him on our behalf. What a friend we have in Jesus!

And how we need His sure friendship as we journey through life. Only He can help us to remain on the path of faith and love that is and will always be eternal life. When temptations strive to snare us in sin, where else can we turn but to Him who was tempted in all the ways we are yet never gave in? When we falter in our calling to put death the deeds of the sinful nature, Jesus is the One we call upon in hope of receiving forgiveness and grace to do better. Though with each day of life, we face a future uncertain and sometimes unfriendly, Jesus is our confidence, our strength, our hope, our true friend. His love will never fail us.

Never fail us? "That's right!" cries Paul. "*Who shall bring any charge against God's elect?*" and "*who shall separate us from the love of Christ?*" he asks without waiting for our answer. Can the law condemn us anymore? No, for Jesus fulfilled it completely for us. Will Satan's accusations prevail in God's court against us? Not with Jesus as our defense lawyer. God counts us righteous because of Jesus' loving work. Name the disaster! Pick a problem! Think of a threat! Can any of them truly signal that we are beyond the reach of God's salvation? Can they separate us from the love of this Friend, this Divine Brother who sticks by us? "No! Nada! Never!" His love will never fail us. He will never forsake us nor will He leave us.

Think what that means. Again, Paul has to tell us: "*in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*" From the moment you open your eyes to

awaken to a new day until your head hits the pillow for a night's sleep, no matter what the day brings to you – joy or sorrow, disappointment or fulfilment, pain or pleasure – say to yourself, “God is for us, Jesus loves us, and the Holy Spirit helps us.” Say to God, “Thank you, my Heavenly Father, for I am more sure that You love me than I know that the sun will rise and set each morning and night. And say to the people among whom you live, “There is a brother who always sticks close to us, and His name is Jesus.” Amen.