

“Hypernikomen: More than Conquerors”

July 30, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania
The Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

Text: “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”

Romans 8:35-37; NRSV



[Image Credit: Mark Andrew Turner, “A Scottish claymore stabbed into the ground on the hills above Loch Doine.”
<https://www.dphotographer.co.uk/image/89103/claymore>]

In searching for an image to accompany this week’s bulletin and lesson, I sought an artistic rendering of a two-handed broadsword stabbed into the ground; a symbol of a super-conqueror who having enjoyed the battle has planted the sword into the earth as victor. The Scottish claymore is just such a weapon and the image above is a very potent visual metaphor. I appreciate the artistry of Mark Andrew Turner, digital photographer, in composing this stirring image. In viewing the Scottish loch in the background (Loch Doine), it is no wonder the Scots-Irish immigrants who came into the Appalachians of America felt so very much at home.

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through

them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

I always remembered the night before vacation as something like “Christmas in August.” We waited for Dad to get home from an inevitable – and seemingly interminable meeting at Church – so we could begin packing the car. Each one of us had assigned tasks beyond our own personal belongings: My sister D.A. saw to that! Bill got together the games and puzzles; Bonnie rounded up bathing suits; D. A. helped Mother pack the spices and kitchen ware . . . After all, going away for a month’s vacation took some planning and preparation. Goodness knows we didn’t want to be stranded at the lake in the midst of a three-day rain without “Monopoly” or “Flinch” – and though the food always tasted better in the mountains of New Hampshire, my mother wanted certain of her pots along anyway.

I neglected to tell you what my job was – when I was younger, I was asked to stay out of the way as much as possible! I had plenty of time to gather together the toys I thought I needed to have with me, and I had more than enough time to sit around and anticipate vacation itself!

The wait from when Dad got home from work ‘til when we left the next morning at 6 00 7 was an eternity for me – like the long winter night’s wait for the morning joys of Christmas Day. And though we were technically “on vacation,” we were still waiting for the fruits of vacation to ripen on the vine: the splash of lake water on a cloudless day; penny-candy from the Old Country Store in nearby Moultonborough; the haunting melodies of loons at twilight. . . In packing the car, and in waiting through the long night, we were already on vacation, but were not yet on vacation – Already, but not yet.

This idea is not a new one. In fact, it has a Biblical heritage. The theological word for it in Greek is “Ar-ra-bone” [“ἀρραβων”]. The word comes to Greek from the Hebrew word that means “a pledge”, or “down payment”; a promise of more to follow.

Perhaps the closest thing we have to that sense is the idea of betrothal, or engagement. The engagement ring which the bride-to-be wears is a symbol of fidelity and promise that what is true now in the couple's relationship will be confirmed when they go down the aisle – married, but not yet married.

Being Christians, we live our lives always on the fine edge between the already and the not yet; between what we are in Christ and what we will be in Christ. In a sense, as Christians we see in the mirror darkly now – though we are able to make out an image, but then, we shall see face-to-face. . . And though that may cause confusion for some; and impatience in others – like waiting for vacation to begin – for Paul, the Apostle, it was all he needed to make it through another day.

Picture if you will, the image of a somewhat bent, slightly built man, of no memorable looks, whose voice when heard was rather unattractive; body colored permanently by bruises that would never really go away; covered by scars which had long since hardened into gruesome reminders of too many encounters with the whip; the wheezing in his chest noticeable now after stays in dank, dark dungeons. Picture this woebegone fellow bent over a thin manuscript scratching out these words: *"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, 'For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.'"* -- By now most of us are saying, "Yep, that's enough to do it . . . yep. – But the old man continues writing: *"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 principalities, 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."*

Paul set down the stylus for a moment to cough up the phlegm which choked him, he tried to straighten up, but he'd sat too long on the rough wooden bench . . . His knees weren't happy – all those missionary miles catching up to him – and this was the third such trip in his lifetime . . . He looked over the words on the paper. A smile creased his leathery face . . . Perhaps a little laughter for Paul, the Apostle, in the midst of decay; a light-hearted moment in an otherwise bleak and sullen present? Yes, but not a smile which comes from seeing the absurdity of the situation as it is, but a smile because the situation is not what it looks like . . . Paul has just rehearsed a litany of all those things which could and should by all human understandings drive us away from God – things which he himself has borne like tattoos on his body – but comes away saying, “No, in all these things ‘hyoo-per-nik-O-men” [Greek: Ὑπερνικῶμεν] – we are more than conquerors!

Even though his body is falling apart around him, even though his age is creeping up on him, even though his “thorn in the flesh” won't go away, even though he's seen more prisons than most repeat-offenders. . . He has the confidence to say “hy-per-nik-O-men” . . . “We are super-conquerors!”

One wonders what those around him might have thought of his confidence. Imagine the scoffers – “Where does he get off talking victory when the battle isn't even over? Hasn't anybody told Paul that a Christian is ‘persona-non-grata’ in most of the Roman world? How would he know the difference between victory and defeat anyway?”

The secret for Paul was a name in his heart that he kept close . . . It was the name of Christ Jesus through whom God chose to reveal himself in flesh to the world. And it was this name – this face – which Paul clung to; for it was through Christ Jesus that the discrepancies of his present were made right in his future. This was how the Apostle could detail the vagaries of his sordid sinful short-comings in Romans, chapter 7 – a listing that would bring all of us to our

knees in futility, wailing with him in sorrow: *"Who will deliver me from this body of death?"* --

Yet go on in triumph at the beginning of chapter 8 saying, *"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!"*

You see, Paul experienced "the already, but not yet" in his experience of Christ. He was more than a conqueror now; even though the current state of affairs was at odds with the usual trappings of victory, ". . . *'In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us . . .'* The Apostle Paul knew that his personal victory was not secured by any personal act of heroism; Paul did not rush against the gates of Hell to steal his salvation back from the devil; Paul realized that there was nothing that he did or could do that would insure his triumph – only Christ Jesus was able. The reason Paul could talk about the triumph and the victory in terms which suggested that they were already assured was because Paul knew Christ, and knew enough to call out to him in confidence through all of life's ups and downs."

Do we think enough of Christ Jesus to live our lives as "more than conquerors?" – Whether we lose a job, lose a loved one, fight an illness, battle disease, or fight depression? -- Do we – can we think enough of Christ in our lives to be Hypernikomen?

As you step into God's future for you beyond this day, do so with the bold strides of those who know where they are going – whatever the present circumstances may be – because you know, by name, who it is who leads you. And live your lives in the marvelous tension of the "already, but not yet" by which you grow daily into the fullness of him whom we will one day see face-to-face.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.