



## MARTYR'S SUNDAY (ALL SAINTS DAY)

### LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

**Sunday, November 2, 2008**

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**Lection - Romans 8:35-39** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 35) Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? (v. 36) As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." (v. 37) No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. (v. 38) For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, (v. 39) 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.

### **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

The word “martyr” comes from the Greek word *martyrs*, meaning witness. While Jesus is the greatest model of the faithful martyr in the New Testament, the word also is used in Acts to describe people who were witnesses of Jesus’ life and resurrection (Acts 1:8). In Christian usage, “martyr” soon acquired the meaning “blood-witness,” that is, the person who was put to death because of her testimony on behalf of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> Under pressure, martyrs freely chose death over life as a witness to the truth of Jesus’ claims and to their faith in Jesus. In the early church, Christians would celebrate the anniversary of a martyr’s death by keeping an all-night vigil and then celebrating the Lord’s Supper over the tomb or the shrine at the place of martyrdom.

The cloud of witnesses whom we honor on this day consists of saints of God who led exemplary lives and who died believing that Christian faith and black liberation mattered more than life itself.<sup>2</sup>

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Romans 8:35-39**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

I was reared during the racial tensions that dominated life in Memphis, Tennessee in the 1960s to ‘70s. Discrimination and racism were vicious viruses that sought to kill the dreams of many aspiring African Americans. Yet, loving parents, strong black churches, and resilient neighborhoods provided the antidote of hope that immunized those dreams from premature death. Empowered by a sturdy faith in Jesus, my parents and the many black “elders” in my church and neighborhood were willing to suffer great injustice so that future generations might prosper and advance the cause of justice.

Yet injustices of various kinds continue to inflict suffering upon so many, thereby turning their dreams into nightmares. Regularly, I see people driving down the highway with all their earthly belongings stuffed into their sputtering cars. In record numbers, poor brown, black, and white people are losing their homes to foreclosure and are having their cars repossessed. Gasoline is more than \$4.00 per gallon, even as good-paying jobs are disappearing. Hangman’s nooses appear on professors’ doors, in middle-school bathrooms, and schoolyard trees. In the midst of these dilemmas, a serious question confronts me and my generation: are we, like our ancestors, willing to suffer so that more people might enjoy justice and live their dreams?

### **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

Romans was written by the Apostle Paul in the late 50’s or early 60’s CE. He sends the letter to Christians in Rome to introduce himself and to discuss important topics of Christian theology. It was Paul’s hope to visit the church in Rome as he traveled to Spain to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Romans 8:35-39 exhorts Christians to trust that God will care for and deliver them even in the most desperate situations. While the persecution of Christians in the ancient world was local and sporadic, the threat was ever present. Whether people were persecuted depended on political, social, and economic circumstances in the Roman Empire. Persecution was worst during periods of economic or political turmoil when a scapegoat was needed on whom to place blame for bad

times. As a small congregation in the political center of the Roman Empire, the first-century church at Rome was especially aware of the threat of persecution.

With the poetic cadence of a preacher, Paul passionately reminds these believers that Christ's love will accompany them as they face difficult dilemmas and even death. Dishonest leaders, brutal dictators, wars and rumors of wars might heap suffering and injustice upon believers, but there is no person or peril on this planet strong enough to separate believers from the empowering love of Jesus Christ. Paul's proclamation in this passage is clear: persevere through it all—persecution, famine, poverty, incarceration, violent intimidation—because God has promised to be with us, come what may! God's love for us, displayed in the ministry of Jesus, is a central theme in this passage and appears in vv. 35, 37, and 39. We can place our trust in God because God has generously poured out His love upon us. No trial or tribulation can destroy that divine love.

African Americans are intimately acquainted with “trials and tribulations.” For nearly four hundred years, we have been persecuted, martyred, and frequently made the cultural and political scapegoat by persons in power. We have been kidnapped and beaten, crammed into stinking ships, enslaved by cruel slavers, and disinherited by broken promises during the Reconstruction Era. We have suffered segregation and disenfranchisement in a country we helped build. Many black Christian leaders, who have agitated for the liberation and freedom of our people, have been beaten, tortured, and assassinated. As a people, we have endured hunger, starvation, homelessness, separation, segregation, lynching, and disappearances. Our people have been killed “all day long” and “accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.” (v. 36)

Even today, we still suffer hardship and distress, as well as persecution and peril in the form of broken political promises, evaporating jobs and the dominant culture's arrogant mockery and misunderstanding of the black church tradition. Yet, through Jesus' life-changing love, we are more than conquerors. Jesus' love for us makes us a loving and compassionate people. Jesus' love for us has prompted us to build a spiritual tradition that offers a testimony of life and liberation, hope and healing, to hounded and harassed people the world over. Our pilgrimage as a people can serve as a living testimony of the triumph of right over might; and we can work as part of God's ongoing purpose to save a suffering and lost world.

Our slain martyrs believed unto death that God's word was true and that each person, regardless of race, gender, creed, or color, was fearfully and wonderfully made. Because God loves us and makes all of us equal, prejudiced thinking and bigoted actions are attempts to negate God's goodness and to place human values before God's supreme equity and justice. As Paul says in another letter, our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, authorities, and powers of this fallen world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm [Eph. 6:12]. Satan would have us believe that hatred and prejudice extinguish the good, discourage the just, and silence truth-tellers. But the devil is a liar, and the truth is not in him. Those who are faithful to the point of death will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God and will receive the crown of life [Rev. 2:10].

Romans 8:35-39 compels us to have patience because no suffering or injustice, as horrible as it seems and is, can separate us from God's love. Take courage, saints. Even as you work to change

your circumstances and those of others for the good, realize that all things work together for good for those who love God and who are called according to God's purpose [Rom. 8:28].

These are words of hope for an employee who is struggling on the job with racist co-workers. What happens if you go to your office or into the classroom, and there is a noose hanging from the ceiling? Even as you confront evil, never let evil make you evil. Do not become what you hate. Instead, remember that you are loved by God with an indestructible love. Let that love motivate you to love others, even as you seek to dismantle the evil that others inflict upon you.

## **Celebration**

No matter the situation or struggle, God has the last word, and that word is always "love." Rulers, powers, and principalities are a defeated mob, for Jesus has disarmed them through his loving sacrifice on Calvary's cross [Rom. 5:8]. There is absolutely no power in heaven, or on earth, or under the earth that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Thanks be to God!

## **Descriptive Details**

Although this lection passage provides us with some non-abstract images (sheep being slaughtered), preachers may want to use the sights, sounds, smells and colors presented by the lives and stories of our martyrs and freedom fighters such as:

### **Sounds:**

- The sound of vigorous clapping, strong hugs, and joyous laughter as Dr. King and his colleagues, as well as President Lyndon B. Johnson and other lawmakers, celebrated the long-awaited passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The song "Amazing Grace" being sung by prisoners in jail; the families of the martyred grieving and crying, wailing and sobbing; or the calm, confident prayers of Civil Rights workers prior to a march;
- The clanging of the jail cell doors that housed so many innocent freedom fighters; the sound of a rifle being loaded by an assassin; the sound of silence as people huddle under church pews to escape marauding murderers intent on massacre; hounds, horses' hooves and hate chasing Nat Turner and his band of brothers; the sound of hate at the other end of the telephone saying, "Nigger, you're number one on a list of people we don't need around here anymore.";

### **Sights:**

- Black bodies hanging from trees and scaffolds; hundreds of bodies dumped on top of each other with vultures circling; ominous headlights in the rearview mirror of your car on a Mississippi back road; the sight of your best friend and brother in Christ lying on the balcony of a hotel mortally wounded; and

### **Smells:**

- The smell of the rotting flesh of sheep; the smell of gunpowder as your brothers and sisters in the struggle face execution by a firing squad; or the smell of human bodies left to rot in the scorching sun.

### III. Resources to Accompany Romans 8:35-39

- “The Life and Death of Steven Biko-Part 1,” 1977. Online location: [www.YouTube.com](http://www.YouTube.com) accessed 30 April 2008
- Black August began in the 1970s in the California prison system as a way to honor black freedom fighters and political prisoners in the Diaspora. During the month of August, black people are urged to emphasize discipline, resistance to oppression, unity, organization, political education, and physical training. Black August celebrations memorialize the 1791 Haitian rebellion, the 1831 Nat Turner rebellion, and the 1963 March on Washington.
- You might use a garbage can (or an old round tin tub if you can find it) as a symbolic reminder of the reason that Dr. King labored in Memphis. You might also put a voter registration form inside the bulletin to symbolize the one-hundred year struggle in the United States for blacks to achieve full voting rights. Encourage non-registered members to complete the form before they leave worship that day.

### Notable Quotes

- “And then I got into Memphis and some began to talk about the threats of what would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers. But I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn’t matter with me now. Because I’ve been to the mountaintop and I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life, longevity has its place, but I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will, and he’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over and I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the Promised Land. So I’m happy tonight. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

--Martin Luther King, Jr.

- “Being black is not a matter of pigmentation – being black is a reflection of a mental attitude.”

--Steven Biko

- “The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.”

--Steven Biko

- “Our aim must be never to defeat or humiliate the white man, but to win his friendship and understanding. We must come to see that the end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience. That will be a day not of the white man, not of the black man. That will be the day of man as man.”

--Martin Luther King, Jr.

- The Rev. George W. Lee, a civil rights activist, was martyred in Belzoni, Mississippi, May 7, 1955. After being followed one night by violent white people, and with his wife Rose pleading with him to stop his civil rights work, he said to her, “Rose, somebody’s got to stand up.”

--Rose Lee

- “I have frequently been threatened with death. I must say that, as a Christian, I do not believe in death but in the resurrection. If they kill me, I shall rise again in the Salvadoran people . . . If they manage to carry out their threats, I shall be offering my blood for the redemption and resurrection of El Salvador. Martyrdom is a grace from God that I do not believe that I have earned. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, then may my blood be the seed of liberty, and a sign of the hope that will soon become a reality. May my death . . . be for the liberation of my people . . . You can tell them, if they succeed in killing me, that I pardon them and I bless those who carry out the killing. But I wish they could realize that they are wasting their time. A bishop will die, but the church of God – the people – will never die.”

--El Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero

### **Stories and Illustrations**



**Rev. George W. Lee (1904-1955)**

Very early in his life, George Lee felt the call to become a preacher, but he evaded it for several years. It was as a preacher that he came to Belzoni, Mississippi. From the beginning, he felt a lingering discontent with pastoral ministry in the fashion of most Negro preachers of the day. For Lee, it was not enough to orate about heaven and eat free chicken dinners on Sunday. He dreamed of long lines of muscular Negro cotton farmers lining up at the county courthouses demanding to vote. He protested against a system that he knew could crush him, and he was well aware that if he were killed, some Negroes at his funeral would say in hushed tones: “Maybe it’s

just as well the Rev. Lee is gone. He riled the white man too much.” Mrs. Rose Lee said of her husband: “He had a thinking ability better than most of the others, so they came to him.”

Many black people were too beaten down by a racist system to care about freedom, but the few, the tough few, could be the beginning of a freedom movement. One of the hardy few was Mr. Gus Courts who, along with Rev. Lee and 62 other blacks, organized a Belzoni branch of the NAACP early in 1954. The backlash came from the White Citizens Council (WCC). Lee and Courts were part of a group of 95 Negroes who managed to achieve voter status. Lee and Courts believed that they were numbers one and two on a widely circulated WCC “hit list.”

Rev. Lee had a typesetting business; so, he was financially independent. He received several threatening phone calls that sounded like this: “Nigger, you’re number one on a list of people we don’t need around here anymore.” Frequently followed in his car by violent whites, he said to his wife, “Rose, somebody’s got to stand up.” “A religious powerhouse, Lee served three churches, operated a grocery store and a printing shop. As one of the VPs of the Mississippi Council of Negro Leadership and a member of the NAACP, he sermonized about voting and eventually electing a Negro congressman – an idea that caused whites to fear such a political triumph because of the predominant Negro population.”

On May 7, 1955, Rev. Lee went to pick up his preaching suit from the dry cleaners. A convertible roared up from behind and pulled up alongside. One shot rang out - then another. Lee’s car plunged into an old shack tearing it from its foundations. The lower left side of Lee’s face and his jawbone were torn away by the gun blasts, yet he somehow managed to pull himself from the wreckage. Cabdrivers found him and drove him toward the hospital. He died on the way without being able to speak.

Rev. Lee’s funeral service was held at the First Baptist Church. More than 1,000 mourners gathered. He was one of the earliest martyrs of the modern civil rights movement and inspired Medgar Evers and others<sup>3</sup>

### **The 1959 Massacre of Namibian Women Freedom Fighters: Remembering Kakurukaze Mungunda**

On December 9, 1959, black Namibian women of Windhoek declared that enough was enough! On that morning, a procession of women marched to the residence of the Administrator of South West Africa (the name of the country during colonial times.) They demanded that the Administrator drop plans to forcefully relocate the black residents of the “Old Location” to a new, apartheid-style township called Katatura (“the place where we do not want to live”). He refused to negotiate with the women and called in South African police and military units to put down the demonstrations.

On December 10, 1959, demonstrations and the boycott of municipal services continued. The beerhall in the Old Location became the focus of the struggle. Because the people were boycotting the beerhall as well, the municipality would be denied liquor revenue from the Old Location residents. The crisis escalated as the police began to arrest some of the demonstrators. The crowd demanded the release of the jailed demonstrators; the police refused. Large crowds of women gathered on the main street in the Old Location. Seized by panic, the military and police

units began firing on unarmed demonstrators. More than ten people were killed and sixty others wounded. One of the female freedom fighters killed that day was Mrs. Kakurukaze Mungunda.<sup>4</sup>

### **Internet Sites**

- International Christian Concern online location: [www.persecution.org](http://www.persecution.org). This is the website of International Christian Concern (ICC), a non-profit, interdenominational human rights organization whose work is to assist and sustain Christians who are victims of persecution and discrimination due to the practice of their faith.

### **Notes**

1. Water, Mark. The New Encyclopedia of Christian Martyrs. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001. xiii.
2. For more information, Young, Henry J. Major Black Religious Leaders, 1755-1940. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1977; Young, Henry J. Major Black Religious Leaders Since 1940. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1979; and Raboteau, Albert J “The African-American Witness to the Sacred Gift of Life.” Online location: <http://incommunion.org/articles/conferences-lectures/the-african-american-witness> accessed 30 April 2008
3. Mendelsohn, Jack. The Martyrs: Sixteen Who Gave Their Lives for Racial Justice. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1966. pp. 41-63
4. For more information on Mrs. Kakurukaze Mungunda and the Windhoek massacre see, Nghidinwa, Maria Mboono, and Henning Melber. Women Journalists in Namibia's Liberation Struggle, 1985-1990. Basel, Switzerland: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2008; International Human Rights Day and the connection with the shooting at the Windhoek Old Location on 10 December 1959. Online location: <http://www.namibia-1on1.com/a-central/human-rightsday.html> accessed 8 April 2008