

*PW Gathering - Cherokee Presbytery*

**Romans 8:14-23, 31-39**

<sup>14</sup>For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. <sup>15</sup>For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” <sup>16</sup>it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God,

<sup>17</sup>and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. <sup>18</sup>I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup>For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; <sup>20</sup>for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup>that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. <sup>22</sup>We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; <sup>23</sup>and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

<sup>31</sup>What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? <sup>32</sup>He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? <sup>33</sup>Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup>Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. <sup>35</sup>Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? <sup>36</sup>As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.” <sup>37</sup>No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup>For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>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.

**Revelation 21:1-6**

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup>And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup>And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; <sup>4</sup>he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” <sup>5</sup>And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” <sup>6</sup>Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.”

The Heidelberg Catechism begins with this question, “What is your only comfort, in life and in death?” We answer: “That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ...” In life and in death, we belong to God. These words are so appropriate given our texts for today – texts that so often appear in the moments of our lives when we

need them the most, when we come to bear witness to the Resurrection of Christ as we say goodbye to someone we loved.

Yet these words are just as relevant for us this day in our everyday lives – for we have not gathered here for a funeral, but on a Saturday to conduct the ministry, learning, and business of the women of the Church. Today is one of those days that happens between our baptism and our death -- between the Alpha and Omega. Like all of our days, this day is a day where God dwells with us, walks with us, God's people, as we move through the world. Our text from Revelation proclaims, "See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them as their God; they will be God's peoples, and God will be with them..." Alpha and Omega. We belong, in body and soul, in life and in death... Beginning to end. We are God's people and God is with us. Those words offer us so much hope in a world that can seem so hopeless some days. There was another earthquake in Chile this week. The politicians just seem to be angry, bitter and loud – no matter which side of the aisle you are on, and across the world there is still violence, hunger, homelessness, illness, and death. It can be hard to turn on the news and open the newspaper some days, can't it? Have you ever looked around and wondered where, where exactly is our hope? Is there any good news left?

For some of you this may be a strange question -- you may have never once questioned it. You may have rested securely your entire lives knowing that your hope and comfort are in Jesus Christ. For some of us, we need reminding. And for that reminder, there is the book of Romans. Specifically, these verses from the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter. These verses that describe so much of what we may encounter in our world every day – *life* - -perhaps it is running children to and from school and activities, or caring for aging parents. Perhaps you are the grandmothers and are caring for grandchildren now, or worrying about what will happen to you as you age. There are social, civic and church responsibilities you feel weighing upon you. Perhaps you are facing a diagnosis – your or someone else's that will change or end your life. The Roman's text talks about powers and principalities that cannot separate us from God. The entities of financial institutions and economic systems - -these two powers - are what drive so much of our worry and fear these days, causing us sometimes to wonder where, and how, God is with us. All of these things have the potential to leave us in places of despair and hopelessness. And yet, we see the assurances that, "It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us."<sup>35</sup> Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?<sup>36</sup> As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."<sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.<sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,<sup>39</sup> 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."

When I graduated from seminary, my mother gave me a charm that was supposed to go on my charm bracelet – it is the Greek letters Alpha and Omega, intertwined together. That charm never made it to my bracelet. I put it on a necklace and it is one of the pieces of jewelry I reach for more often than I ever thought I would. And every time I pick it up, every time I reach for it, every time I touch it, I hear the echo of the words we read from Revelation just a moment ago "I am the Alpha and the Omega, The beginning and the end." Sometimes the words sound a little different: "I am the Alpha and the Omega -- I am with you always, to the end of the Age -- nothing in all creation can separate us from the love in Christ Jesus our Lord." I have worn that necklace on days when the world seemed hopeless, or when I have needed a physical, tangible reminder of the hope we claim to have in Jesus Christ. I can think of times when I have worn it every day for months as an act of prayer for friends and family. Other times I have not needed to feel it against my skin, but still began each day seeing it

the small dish on my dresser - -a visual reminder that for this day God dwelled with us here as God always has and always will. I wear the necklace on happy days, too, but each time I put it on, I am struck by something - those two small letters on that small charm, remind me that nothing in our world is stronger than the love of Jesus Christ, and God was at the beginning, will be at the end, and encompasses all that comes in between. Nothing can separate us from the love of God - -that is the hope we find in Revelation. Even as the old earth passes away, God is wiping the tears from our eyes and making all things new.

Today is about hope - -the hope that the Presbyterian Women have shown from their beginning through today and into the future. This is a day to mark another year in the life of the Presbyterian Women of Cherokee Presbytery. Today you install new officers, learn how to be moderators and treasurers, learn about knitting crosses for soldiers, and about the study for next year, "Revealing Hope in Revelation." This gathering is indeed a sign of the hope we have in Christ. As I was looking through the information about the work done by the women of Cherokee Presbytery and also the work of PW throughout our denomination, I saw the hope of Christ being proclaimed every where we look. Through your work, you will provide hope in the form of a toothbrush and washcloth to someone who perhaps has lost everything. You will provide school supplies to children in foreign countries, and mosquito nets for children in Africa. Mission has always been a focus of PW - -mission grounded in the Gospel of Christ.

PW is about more than collecting money and sending supplies and holding meetings. A colleague reminded me that for so many years, PW was the way women in the church had a voice and had a say as to how we were going to be involved in the body of Christ - -long before there were women ordained as Elders and Ministers of Word and Sacrament, there were women gathering to serve, learn and minister to their congregations. How many projects were funded because of the tireless efforts of the women of the Presbyterian Church? How many ministers served because of scholarship funds? How many college students received care packages? I could keep asking questions, but to cover everything, we would have to go all the way back to Eve and we would still be here talking about it months from now. Since the beginning, PW has been able to testify that God is doing a new thing - much of the ministry you do happened because someone said "we need to do this" and got it organized. And while the role of women in the church has expanded -many of you here wear multiple hats - as PW officers, Elders, Deacons, and Ministers - PW still thrives. The point is this - as we think about the hope we have in Jesus Christ, we think about the many ways we have shared that hope with others, in word or in deed. We think about the times in our lives when others have reminded us of that hope in Christ. The circles that meet in Fellowship Halls, parlors, and homes, the offerings received, the work that is done are not done in isolation. They are all done with God as God dwells with us.

There is hope revealed in the texts for today. No matter where we find ourselves - -both as we move through life, and as our faith changes and evolves as we grow and change God is indeed with us, and nothing - nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. We may encounter times when we will mourn, when we will cry, but God is right there with us, just as God has been since the beginning and will be until the end. As we look back on the work of the past year, as we look forward to the year to come, see that God does indeed dwell here with us mortals - we are God's people and God is with us. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.