

Romans 8:31-39
“For Us for Real”

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I was blessed to have a professor during seminary that was truly *for* me. He was extremely smart and kind, a pastor and an academic, who happened to take an interest in my steps into pastoral ministry. Dr. Graham became a mentor, father figure, and a friend, and I had not ever had that before – a teacher that would both challenge and support me, watching over my faith formation.

Fortunately in life, you and I encounter people of grace who are *for* us, beyond our expectations and beyond our deserving! In our Friday email, I invited you to list the people who have been in your corner, who had your back, who pointed you in the right direction, and who loved you into your full potential. Was it your parents, or other family members? A friend? A boss? Your spouse? A coach? Or possibly a pastor or a church member?

All of us need those who love us unconditionally, especially so those within our society who are different from the majority, not understood, and those vulnerable to hate crimes, violence, discrimination, or expulsion. **You and I – the church – should be *for* them.**

From a fellow minister, I heard Owen’s story. He lived in the South in the 1930s. It was tough enough to be a black man in that day and time, but Owen also carried a secret. He was afraid to approach his father and mother; they loved him, but he figured that they wouldn’t understand and would disapprove. Eventually, however, Owen braced himself and told them that he was gay. This news was met with a long, silent pause. Then his father said to him, “Owen, find someone that you love, and bring him home.”

Well, if we human beings can share unconditional love, consider then just how much greater is *God’s* love?! This is what Paul wants to drive home to the Romans reading his letter.

They are in a precarious, minority position as the church. It’s not too difficult for the apostle to see that they will come up against persecution, nakedness, peril, and sword. Trouble is on the horizon, and they are going to need a faith worthy of this adversary!

So Paul takes them through a series of rhetorical questions, to which there can only be one answer: 1) If God is for us, who is against us? Nobody, because God gave us Jesus; 2) Who shall bring any charge against us? Nobody, because *God* justifies; 3) Who shall condemn us? Nobody, because Jesus Christ died, was raised, and intercedes for us; 4) Who shall separate us from God’s love? No one. Nothing. Nada. Not death, famine, hardship, rulers, nor *anything else* in all creation!¹ Paul says, “You’ve got this, because of the One who loves you!!” **God is *for* us, for real.**

¹N.T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. X* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 610.

Now, hear me: unconditional love isn't the same as a free pass to sin, or to hurt others, or to make our living lying. Divine love is honest; it challenges and calls us to make harsh change when we need it. We are only worthy by virtue of the one who gave himself up *for* us – Jesus Christ – and his wondrous love will heal and right us.

Next weekend, for example, we will celebrate the 4th of July, and the love and pride of country will be on full display. But ours should be a *humble* pride. Verse three of “O Beautiful for Spacious Skies” says it true, like a prayer: “America! America! God mend thine every flaw.”

God is *for* us, for real.

Nadia Bolz-Weber is a crackerjack Lutheran pastor and in her book, *Accidental Saints*, she shares the epiphany that one of her parishioners experienced. Stephen was quite a successful man according to the world's standards: a vice president at a Fortune 500 company, now an elected official, living in a loft downtown, and Nadia writes that he looks like a movie star. Nevertheless, he battles terrible issues with low self-esteem. Nadia's sermon on the love of God provoked him to tell her: “Man! I wonder what my life would look like if I *really* believed this? How would my life be different if I was not scared, if I really believed that I am fully and totally loved by God? No wonder we have liturgy and Eucharist every week [at church]. I have to hear this at least that often!”²

²Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints* (New York: Convergent, 2015), 70.