

July 26, 17A (Romans 8:26-39)

There are some matters that a well-rehearsed and repeated Bible verse won't fix.

by [Gary V. Simpson](#) in the [July 15, 2020](#) issue

Preachers and teachers of preaching speak about the application of a text. When I grew up, appliqués were simply ironed onto jeans and T-shirts. We were often frustrated when the washer and dryer began the ugly process of separating appliqué from fabric. The best of our art and words were ruined. They could not withstand the cycle of water and heat.

Such is the idea of biblical application. My friend Len Sweet argues that many Christians suffer from “verse-itis,” a chronic disease that reduces the faith to an ability to quote chapter and verse. Once reserved for bumper stickers, T-shirts, and billboards, Bible verses now scroll across screen savers and social media feeds. They are often applied in quick and fleeting ways to circumstances that may require more reflection.

To apply scripture to life is by definition to concede a certain superficiality. As a child, I would go to the local swimming pool and, at some point, get a cut. The lifeguard in the office applied a Band-Aid, and back into the water I jumped. Chlorine and Band-Aid adhesive worked together, and soon the Band-Aid was gone.

We need something deeper, more lasting. Instead of applying scripture, we need to embody it. Application seems so limited; it may only involve the wounded area itself. Embodiment is a more holistic and full-body experience of scriptural encounter. As a preacher, I do not want people to apply the sermon to their lives. I want the sermon to become a part of our living.

The Romans text for today contains one of those “application” verses: “All things work together for the good of those who love the Lord, who are called according to God’s purposes.”

Can we agree that there are some bad things that do happen, in which God is not lining up the universe for our good? What happens when the faithful are working at cross purposes even though we claim to be the called? This verse tries to hold the tension between two inevitable truths: On the one hand, bad things—awful things—will happen. On the other hand, the faith asserts that God is always active, and the faithful presume this means God is active *for us*.

There are times when the epistles try to force a retrofit of a contemporary dilemma to an ancient theological position. For example, 1 Timothy explains the subjugation of women on the grounds that Adam was created before Eve, a shaky argument that seems to privilege the second creation story of Genesis 2-3 over the *imago Dei* text of 1:27. The biblical choices we make have lasting theological implications.

This section of Romans 8 is full of trouble. It is filled with what Marcus Borg calls “speaking Christian”: words and ideas that those of us who are familiar with the faith believe we already understand. We hear them and repeat them to each other often, and we impose and presuppose a meaning that may not be there. We forget that repetition, like all ritual, starts to assign meaning. There are some matters that a well-rehearsed and repeated Bible verse will not fix.

We should be comforted by this passage as it begins. It reminds us of our limited sight and our inability to express our sincerest desires in prayer. The God that searches us also allows the Spirit to intercede for us. Why is it that we can agree that talking with God is filled with mystery, but talking about God must be done with exacting certitude?

Paul continues, asserting a specialness for us that perhaps cannot be substantiated, and then shifts to the best of Christian rhetoric and the unique place of Christ in this whole schematic.

Life is hard. Often frustrating. Sometimes unbearable. One can tell by the poetry that the people who are hearing these words read before them are people who have gone through deep and long-term continuous suffering of some sort. The list of dilemmas Paul makes in verse 35 is of the worst of human trauma and trouble. What appears to be a biblical application in verse 36 (“As it is written . . .”) does not in any way relieve the hardship.

How does one get from this daily assault on life to the assertion in the next verse that “we are more than conquerors through him who loved us”?

What is intriguing to me is that Paul raises the question about *who* shall separate us, and then he begins a list of *whats*. He names these lofty concepts—and places them all in the category of creatureliness. His conclusion: no creature can separate other creatures (us) from the love of the Creator profoundly found in Jesus Christ.

We cannot apply Band-Aids to the brokenness of creation. Wholeness and continued connection to the Creator demand that we start to look for long-term, sustainable solutions to our problems. This is a text that we cannot claim while we are yet going through something. The catalog of experiences makes me think this is a mature and experienced Paul, who has gone through the trouble he lists.

We take solace and comfort not in a belief that God has it all planned out or wills us to trials and tragedies, but in the promise that God is with us in all of that. We cannot be separated from the love of God. Unfortunately, sometimes that is all we get. Thankfully, it is all we need.

It is not so because we simply say that it is. It is so because it becomes embodied in us.