

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary GRADUATION SERMON 2010 “WE ARE MORE THAN CONQUERORS”

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In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Ro 8:37-39).

Dear Brothers:

Britain stood alone. Much of Europe lay under the power of Nazi thugs. Though the English army had just staged a dramatic escape across the English Channel, there was no arguing against the fact that England had suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of their enemies. The future looked decidedly bleak. Against this gloomy backdrop, on June 4, 1940, Winston Churchill stood up in the House of Commons to speak. What he said put fire in his people's hearts and steel in their backbone:

We shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air; we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender!

A magnificent cry of defiance hurled right into the teeth of the horror!

If we want to search the pages of the Old and New Testament for similar cries of defiance, we won't have to look far. We think of what David said to Goliath: "This day the Lord will hand you over to me, and . . . the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord's" (1 Sa 17:46-47). Or the way Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego looked Nebuchadnezzar in the eyes and said, "O King, our God can save us from you, but even if he does not, know this that we will not bow down to your idol" (Dn 3:16-18). Or what about what John and Peter said to the Sanhedrin, "We cannot help but speak about what we have seen and heard!" (Acts 4:19).

As your class verse you have chosen another bold and brave word, this time from Paul's majestic eighth chapter of his letter to the Romans. Why did you choose it? Is it because you've lived through a year with a gloomy cloud hanging over your heads? I mean the thought that maybe half your class might not get assignments on assignment day. And even though the clouds have parted, the fact is there is still a handful of your number waiting for assignments. Is it because of some of the reports you're hearing from the front lines? It's tough out there, and you know that there are some real challenges ahead of you in your ministry. We hear every day of congregations and schools struggling to make ends meet. Or is it just because you know that this world will never be a friend to the gospel, and you know that we're living in the last days when hearts are growing cold and people are falling away?

Whatever the reason, you chose this word to express your own defiant faith, "I am convinced . . ." "I am convinced . . ." We will not give way to fear, nor will we falter. No matter what the situation, we won't give in to the voices of doom and gloom. We'd rather shake our fist at the devil and cry defiance: more than conquerors, we say, more than conquerors,

We Are More Than Conquerors Through Him Who Loved Us!

Now when a Christian cries defiance, it's a whole lot different than when the world does it. This is not a shout that comes from our own sense of strength, our own human bravery, or our own ability to tough things out. Can you imagine what would have happened if Saul had said to David, "Mental toughness my boy, mental toughness. That's the only way you're going to face down a guy like Goliath." As it was, Saul tried to give David his armor, and it didn't fit. Nor would any human armor have helped David in the battle he was facing—not mental armor, not emotional armor, not physical armor.

Because the battle, at bottom, is a spiritual battle, and that means it can't be won with human resources. We just aren't strong enough. Flesh born of flesh as we are, we cannot stand up against the enemies lined up against us. In any challenge in life, and certainly in any ministry challenge, if we fall for the thought that it's just a matter of us being smart enough to figure things out on our own, or strong enough to tough things out, we are totally misreading the situation. We're bound to fail. Remember what happened to Peter when he cried defiance, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you" (Mt 26:35). We all know how that worked out.

The fact is, as Paul reminds us in this same chapter, we are sheep marked out for slaughter. That's the way it is and must be for those

who follow the Lamb! He walked the way of suffering for us and before us. The pattern for the way in which the gospel is going to make its way in this world has already been set: it's through sufferings to glory. Jesus says, "Follow me!" We are slaughter sheep who follow the Lamb, a Lamb that was slain.

And that's what makes this cry of defiance so different, and so powerful. We can face facts. We can face that fact that we can't—on our own—possibly win the battle against the devil, the sinful world, and our own sinful nature. We can face the fact that we're simply not up to the challenges of 21st century ministry, not by our own power, not by a long shot. We can face the cross. We can face the fact that the world is bound to crucify whatever is of God. But even knowing all that, you can face the present with a clear-eyed faith, and look to the future with a firm confidence, saying with Abraham, Paul and all the saints who have ever walked before you, "Yes . . . but!!" All this may be true. I may be weak. My flesh and my heart may fail. I may have to bear this cross. I may have to deal with this opposition to the gospel. My intentions may be misread and the love I show despised by others. My foes may outnumber the hairs on my head.

But in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us! There is something stronger than my sin. And that is the love of Jesus who died for me, in whom I find myself, because of whom there is now therefore no condemnation for me. There is one more powerful than any weakness that I feel. And that is the stronger man who overpowered the Devil himself and who gives his victory to me.

Jesus has gripped me with his love and will never let me go. No one and nothing can separate me from him. Not the cold grey hand of death. Nothing I may ever have to deal with in life. No power in heaven. No scheme of man. Nothing that may trouble me in this present moment. Nothing that may lurk for me in my future. No exalted height of joy. No sadness and woe, however deep. Because of that love I cry defiance and say, "I am more than a conqueror. This will not overwhelm me. This cannot overpower me. I will fight on with my Jesus by my side! He will never leave me. He will never forsake me. He will never let me go."

John once had a revelation, a vision. And in that vision he caught a glimpse of heaven. The Father was seated high and exalted upon the throne. And in his hand was a scroll. The whole history of the world was on that scroll. Every deed. Every triumph. Every defeat. Every life. Every death. All the annals of all our days. Your days. My days. The scroll was sealed with seven seals. No one could open it. No one was worthy. In all that magnificent assembly around God's throne, no

one was found worthy to unlock the meaning of life and explain the reason for our existence. John wept and wept, and no wonder!

Then a Lamb came. He came to the center of the throne. He looked like a Lamb that was slain. He is found worthy to unseal the scroll. The vision is not hard to understand. At the center of the universe there is God. He does all in all. But right at the heart of everything, there is Jesus. He is God's purpose behind all that was, and is, and will be. He is a slaughtered Lamb, a Lamb who died for love of you, died to take your sin away.

But we haven't even seen the most beautiful comfort of all: this slain Lamb now stands. He lives no more to die. He lives beyond death. He lives for you. And because he lives no more to die, you know that loves you with an unbreakable, unshakeable love.

A love that gives you an unbreakable, unshakeable confidence: "I am convinced . . . I am convinced . . . More than conquerors through him who loved us."

Amen.