

Convinced (Romans 8:26-39)

In Romans 8, Paul moves from argument to testimony.

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Of what are you convinced? What conviction could you, like Paul, build a watertight case for, complete with facts and proofs and your very own experience?

I don't expect a lot. In humility, most of what we think we know should be held loosely with elastic built in to stretch it or add more to it—and a willingness to cut some of it out when new information and experiences become available. But to be convinced is to know in a way that resists and, perhaps, refuses to be moved. When we are convinced of something, the only new information we seek or accept is that which will confirm our already deeply held truth.

After my mom's untimely death in 2005, my faith changed dramatically. I wasn't the only one who noticed. After being back in the pulpit a few months after she died, a parishioner said to me on her way out of worship, "Your preaching has always been good, and I've never doubted your sincerity. But now it feels like you really *mean* it. And you really believe it for yourself. I hope it's okay that I say this"—she was from a Pentecostal background among Norwegian Lutherans—"but it sounds to me like a testimony . . . and I love it!"

She could hear that I was truly convinced of my own words in a way that had never quite been there before. I affirmed that what she could see was also what I could feel. Beliefs that dwelled in my intellect had found their way into my whole self:

body, mind, being, spirit, soul, strength.

Preaching wasn't just a bunch of nice ideas anymore to talk about using pretty words that may enlighten, impress, or comfort. No, I was telling the truth as I had come to know and experience it: the truth of God's presence in the pits of death and grief. The truth of God's provision through the community of the faithful. The truth of God's power to give me breath when I couldn't breathe and move my feet when I couldn't walk. The truth of God's promise that the end of my mother's life on this earth was not the end of our life together.

Before she died, I spoke of God's presence, provision, power, and promises. I even believed what I said. But after she died, I spoke of it as a witness—one who had seen it with my own eyes, felt it with my own body, and knew it as truth I couldn't help myself from sharing. I didn't believe. I was convinced.

The eighth chapter of Romans is Paul's testimony, and the grand finale is verses 37-39: "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 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!"

Still a lawyer and debater, Paul's rhetoric up to this point in the text employs the tools of his trade. But before too long, he can't help himself anymore. And his beautiful theological propositions about life in the Spirit, the reconciliation of Creation, and the intercessions of sighs too deep for words become a full-blown, unapologetic testimony.

Praise be to God! May every person who listens to the sermons this week hear a preacher who is convinced. Don't just speak. Testify!