

Prayer for Illumination:

Holy and Loving God, send your Spirit now that these words before us would be your words of life, words of peace, and words of hope. Grow good things in us through this gift of your Word. Amen.

Romans 8: 28-39 – Nothing Can Separate Us

When I was growing up in Iowa my parents would sometimes take our family to the annual Tulip Festival in Orange City, Iowa. We would watch the parades with the bands and the homemade floats and the Dutch dancers with their wooden shoes. We would eat funnel cakes and poffertjes – these tiny Dutch pancakes covered in icing sugar. So overall – it was the kind of thing I was definitely into. But my siblings and I were pretty young, so if we found ourselves walking through a big crowd of people my parents would always say something like, “Hold someone’s hand, we don’t want to get separated from each other.” This is good advice, I think, but I was kind of an anxious kid so those simple instructions would put me on edge. I would hold on extra tight to my mom’s hand, and I would run through every scenario I could think of – figuring out what I would do if I got separated from them. I would look for my dad – he was the tallest and easiest to spot – if I couldn’t find him I would look for a police officer – if I couldn’t see a police officer I would look for another family with little kids who could help me – if they had little kids they were probably nice people, I thought, and I would stay still and wait for my family to come and find me. Even the suggestion that being separated was a possibility was enough to send my young mind reeling. What would I do if I got separated from my family?

As Paul writes this letter to the Romans, there are many things that threaten to separate the early Roman believers from God. Surely, they too must have wondered, “What will we do if we get separated from the family, what will we do if we get separated from God?” As the first believers in Rome gathered to hear this letter from Paul they did so under the shadow of an empire that had a vested interest in doing all it could to separate these Christ-followers from their God. The empire would beat them, put them in jail, even kill them – all in an attempt to smother any idea that there might be a force out there that was stronger than Caesar. Caesar was the self-proclaimed lord of the world. N.T. Wright explains that this meant, “[Caesar’s] position was by implication challenged and threatened by the Jewish Messiah [Jesus], who claimed the same role [as lord of the world]. To come to Rome with the gospel of Jesus, to announce someone else’s accession to the world’s throne, therefore, was to put on a red coat and walk into a field with an angry bull.”¹ The powers of the empire threatened to separate the early Roman believers from God. And so they must have wondered, “What will we do if Caesar rips us away from our Abba, Father?”

¹ N. T. Wright, *Commentary on Romans* in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*. Abingdon Press, 2002. 423.

It was not only the powers of Rome, but also the powers of sin that threatened to separate the Roman believers from God. In Chapter 7 of Romans Paul shares this picture of a person who is a slave to sin – it is not only the Roman empire that would imprison and enslave the believers, it was also sin. He writes, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do...As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me” (Rom. 7:15, 17). He’s saying, “I want to be better, I want to do better! I want to follow the law of God! But I just can’t seem to do it!” This is a picture of a person who is exasperated, who is tired, who is imprisoned by sin and separated from God. He has seen all the life coaches, made all the New Year’s resolutions, read all the self-help books. He is riddled with guilt and shame for all the things he has done and left undone, but of course guilt and shame do not make him a better person. This is a picture of Paul and a picture of the Roman believers when they try to follow God’s law by themselves. And so they must have wondered, “What will we do if our Abba, Father sees us for who we really are, drops our hand and leaves us to fend for ourselves?”

These same questions sometimes linger in our minds today. What will I do if something threatens to rip me away from God? What will I do if God sees me for what I am and walks away? What will I do if I get separated from the family of God? The reality of separation has taken on a more immediate and palpable meaning for us in the last four months of this pandemic – but of course you know that, having been separated from family, friends, work, school, and church. For now we cope by using technology, doing backyard or porch visits, wearing face masks, and by gradually and cautiously widening our social circles. The relief that comes from seeing friends or family, even the excitement about returning to this building in the coming weeks and months just highlights how difficult the separation has been. But for some who are watching today the separation that has happened because of the pandemic is settling somewhere deeper in your souls, the separation may be amplifying your doubts, overshadowing hope, and straining even your faith. Maybe being physically separated from this building and from your church family feels a lot like being ripped away from a place of belonging. Maybe this church building has been a kind of anchor for your week and so you feel unmoored in this time of separation. At times it may even feel like this pandemic threatens to tear you away from God or God’s family.

Then there are also the ways that we are like the Paul from Romans 7 – the power of sin threatens to separate us from God. We might be able to fool the people around us into thinking that we’ve got it all together, but there is no fooling God...and we’re likely not fooling ourselves either. Reading about this person in Romans 7 is like looking in a mirror. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. Maybe you think, “I want to be patient and kind, but you know what comes a lot easier than that? Sarcasm, cynicism, even anger and rage.” Maybe you think, “I want to honor this body that God has given me, but instead I keep finding ways to put harmful things inside it or treating it like it’s expendable.” Or “I want to tell the truth, but it’s so much easier to bend the truth; I want to honor God in worship, but I just can’t help being annoyed by the things I don’t like or even just bored by it all; I want to serve

God, but honestly at the end of the day I don't know what that looks like in my life so it's just easier to put my head down and push through my days." We say with Paul, "I want to be better, I want to do better! I want to follow the law of God! But I just can't seem to do it!" Still, we put on our best appearances and try even harder to just do better because, "What will we do if our Abba, Father sees us for who we really are, drops our hand and leaves us to fend for ourselves?" Even, "What will we do if our church family sees us for who we really are, drops our hand, and leaves us to fend for ourselves?" The power of sin threatens to separate us from God and from each other.

In our text this morning Paul assures the people gathered to hear his letter that Christ Jesus faced separation from the Father so they wouldn't have to. So for those who are in Christ, these things that threaten to separate them from God will ultimately fail. Paul assures the believers in Rome of 3 things: that in Christ, God is with them, that God is for them, and so nothing can separate them from the love of God.

First, Paul assures them that God is with them. We saw this last week when Pastor Amanda talked about how in the face of the Roman Christians' real suffering and pain God did not respond by glossing over it – God did not tell them to buck up and just see the good in their hardships. No, God was meeting them in their suffering, in creation's frustration and bondage. God was with them in their confrontations with the Roman empire. The Holy Spirit was groaning with them and interceding for them. The place where they could see most clearly that God was with them in their pain was in the cross of Jesus Christ. Suffering, pain, even death would not separate them from God because those are precisely the places where God meets them in the crucified Christ.

In verse 28 we read that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him," which might kind of sound like the world's all going on and bad stuff is happening but don't worry, buck up, it's all working together for good – which I suppose is ultimately true, and maybe you find some comfort in that. But there is another way to read this verse. The Greek grammar of this passage could also read, "With those who love him, God works all things together for good." It's a subtle shift, but it places the emphasis on *with those who love him*. God is with them, working alongside them to bring about good things.

Second, Paul says that God is not only *with* them, but God is also *for* them. Paul says, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" It's a rhetorical question – the obvious answer is "no one." God is for them – which is to say, God is not only with them in the face of those things that threaten to tear them apart from God – God is also actively working to do something about it. All the sin that threatens to hold them captive and separate them from God has been dealt with through the death and resurrection of Christ. The fear that God might see them as they truly are and drop their hand and walk away is simply something that will not happen. God did see them as they are and instead of walking away with disgust, God did something about it through the cross of Jesus Christ. God did not spare his own son. Paul says, in Christ, they are justified, set free from their bondage to sin, and brought back to their Abba, Father. God is for them.

God is with them. God is for them. And this leads to the assurance and celebration that in the end actually nothing can separate them from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. That fear of being separated from God is completely swallowed up by Paul's picture of a Triune God who is beside them, within them, and before. Jesus Christ is beside them in their suffering interceding on their behalf, The Holy Spirit is within them giving them life and freeing them from the power of sin and the law – interceding with wordless groans, and the Father is before them, beckoning them to the coming kingdom of God. So, Paul says, nothing can separate those early Roman believers from the love of God – not hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword. Not life or death, not angels or demons, not the present or the future or any powers, not height or depth or anything else in all creation will be able to separate them from the love of God that is in Jesus.

This is God's Word for us still today. When we wonder: what will we do if something threatens to rip me away from God? What will we do if God sees us for what we are and walks away? What will we do if we get separated from the family of God? God tells us, I am with you. I am for you. Nothing can separate you from my love.

On Easter Sunday this year – right smack dab in the middle of the lockdown measures, when the atmosphere was thick with grief over all the forms of separation we were experiencing - I listened in to a sermon from a Presbyterian Church in New York City. The preacher, Rev. Dr. Scott Johnston told this story of Beth and Joe.² Beth and Joe are from New Orleans, Louisiana – back in April it was one of the biggest COVID hotspots in America. They live in a multi-phase retirement and care facility that has experienced outbreaks of the virus among their residents. This has been a challenging time for Beth and Joe, who are retired professors. Beth lives in an apartment on one side of the facility while Joe, her husband who suffered a severe stroke a few years ago resides in the memory care section of the facility. Before the virus hit Beth would go to Joe's room every day and wheel him back to her apartment and there they listen to books on tape, talk, and sing together. They always sing the same German hymn (Go Out My Heart and Seek Joy). And being professors, they sing their own translation. In fact, Beth and Joe retranslate [the hymn] from German to English every single day. And because of Joe's stroke, every day is a little like starting over from scratch. But back in March, Lambeth House locked down the memory care wing of their facility. And like so many people, Beth and Joe were separated from each other. Beth could no longer wheel Joe back to her apartment to begin their daily translation. After 3 painful weeks of isolation and separation the facility set up a video chat for the couple. So, once a day, for 20 minutes, they can talk. What do they talk about? Beth reported to Pastor Johnston, that 20 minutes a day is just enough time to translate a single stanza of their favorite hymn, Go Out My Heart and Seek Joy. Then when they finish translating and singing Beth repeats the same words that Joe now calls her litany, "I love you and I have not abandoned you."

² https://www.fapc.org/files/sermon/mp3/2020_04_12_Sermon_Easter_Sunday_SBJ.mp3

God is with us, God is for us, so nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. Jesus Christ is beside us in our suffering praying to the Father on our behalf, The Holy Spirit is within us giving us life and freeing us from the power of sin and the law – even praying for us with wordless groans, and the Father is before us, drawing us in to the coming kingdom of God. So, Paul says, nothing can separate us from the love of God – not hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword or coronavirus or quarantine or doubt or anxiety or loneliness. Not life or death, not angels or demons, not the present or the future or any powers of sin or death or evil, not height or depth or anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus. God is binding the forces of all those things that threaten to separate us with a simple litany, “I love you and I have not abandoned you.” Thanks be to God.

Loving God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit – thank you for this, the gift of your word. Help us to receive what we have heard and to live in ways that witness to your deep and unfailing love.
Amen.