

SERMON SERIES: "What Then Are We to Say?"
SERMON TITLE: "Nothing Can Separate Us from God's Love"
SERMON TEXT: Romans 8:31-39
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: February 16, 2020, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

When I was in elementary school, I really liked that ritual of giving out Valentine's cards to every student in my class. There was something so affirming about giving and receiving those positive messages to and from everyone—not just your best friend or your five best friends—but to and from everyone in the whole class. Don't you kind of wish we adults still did that sort of thing? On occasions, we do still get a similar outpouring of affection. Christmas cards are sort of like that, or when we're celebrating a really big birthday. One time, I broke my wrist quite badly, and I received a pile of get well cards that was about five inches deep. There's something so profound about feeling loved like that.

Today, I want you to feel that kind of affirmation from God. Since the beginning of February, we've been reading and re-reading this same passage of scripture from Romans chapter eight. Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in Rome. It was the middle of the first century, some 20-30 years after Jesus had been crucified and resurrected. Largely due to the missionary travels of Paul and other early believers, the Christian faith was spreading around the Mediterranean region. But all wasn't going easily. Paul himself was frequently imprisoned for preaching the gospel, and tradition has it that Paul was eventually martyred for the cause of Christ.

So, when Paul wrote of hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, or sword, he knew of what he spoke. And, yet, somehow, Paul was able to rise above anger, sadness, and bitterness. When faced with troubles of every kind—instead of sinking into apathy, cynicism, or despair—Paul responded with the positive affirmations, "God is for us!" and "Jesus intercedes for us!" When Paul asked, "What then are we to say about these things?" he answered his own question with a response that should be printed on every Valentine's card: "Nothing can separate us from God's love!"

1—JESUS' DEATH WON'T SEPARATE US FROM GOD'S LOVE

Paul's confidence in the inseparability of God's love comes first of all from Paul's assurance that *Jesus' death* won't separate us from God's love. Paul reasons that, if ever there could have been a deal breaker, it would have been the murderous execution of Jesus on the cross. In the history of God's people, there had been times before when God punished them for breaking the covenant. Think of Adam and Eve being sent out of the Garden of Eden. Think of the great flood that wiped out everyone except Noah, his family, and their boatload of animals. Think of the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles that came as punishment upon Israel and Judah because they had been unfaithful to God. If anything could have caused God to feel so hurt and so angry as to cut off humanity from any further relationship with the divine, it surely would have been the unjust and torturous crucifixion of God's very own Son Jesus. And yet, God-in-Christ and Christ-in-God was the one who reached out to bridge the gap, to restore the relationship, to offer forgiving love.

Maybe you remember Paul's experience on the Road to Damascus. He went by the Hebrew name "Saul" in those days. The Book of Acts tells us that Saul had been busy persecuting the early Christians. All his life, he had been a very zealous Jew, and he believed that God wanted him to do whatever it took to squelch those heretical followers of Jesus. But, as Saul was traveling along the road to Damascus, he was blinded by a bright light and he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"¹

God could have exacted extreme and permanent punishment upon Saul for the sinful ways he was hurting the earliest Christians and the cause of Christ. But, after getting Saul's attention, God restored his sight and gave him the very important mission of spreading the Christian good news. So Paul understood this concept of loving forgiveness very personally. Who could have brought charges against him? God! But, instead, God justified him. Who could have condemned him? Christ Jesus. But, on the contrary, Jesus interrupted the wrong that Saul was doing and interceded for him.

This is what gave Paul so much confidence. And we can be confident too. God is willing to forgive our sin, so that not even Jesus' death can separate us from God's love.

2—OUR SUFFERING AND DEATH WON'T SEPARATE US FROM GOD'S LOVE

As horrible as Jesus' death on the cross was, however, and as terrible was and is humanity's guilt that contributed to Jesus' death--not everyone is always focused on that. So, in the next verses, Paul explains another idea. If the horrific tragedy of Jesus' suffering and death can't separate us from God's love, then neither can *our own suffering and death*.

In verse 35, Paul speaks of *hardships, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword* to describe our fragile and dangerous human condition. In verses 38 and 39, Paul uses other words to convey the spiritual powers, governmental rulers, and forces of nature that so often feel far beyond our control—yet are definitely pulling the strings of our lives.

We who are in the American middle class may have some trouble connecting to the deep anxiety Paul is discussing here. But, on Wednesday, when I attended an Interfaith Works meeting at the Catholic Community Services building, I was reminded how precarious things are. Did you know that, in the Ogden School District, 80% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch? There are some elementary schools that have so many impoverished children that every single child is given a bag of food on Fridays to make sure that they have something to eat at home over the weekends.

Of course, food insecurity isn't the only concern. When a bunch of us from this church went to the state capitol at the end of January for the annual Faith & Poverty Day, the main theme of the conversation was affordable housing. Here in Utah, there are more units of people than there are units of housing. So even people with reasonable incomes can't always find housing that they can afford. This isn't only a personal financial problem; it's becoming a problem for the economic development of the state. Companies can't start up or expand in Utah if there is nowhere for their employees to live.

If local problems aren't enough to cause us concerns, then how about the terrible plague of locusts that's now swarming over Ethiopia and other Horn of Africa countries? The United Nations is warning that if sufficient aid isn't given immediately so they can spray pesticides, the locust problem will increase and spread over the next few months to the point of mass starvation. Since ancient times locusts have periodically destroyed crops, but this year's infestation is threatening epic proportions and is exacerbated by the destruction of armed conflict and a changing climate.

These problems that threaten human well-being and cause suffering and death can feel overwhelming. Because the problems are so huge and so complex, it's easy for us to throw up our hands in despair. Even in our own families, our own peer groups, our own jobs, and our own bodies, there are so many difficulties that we feel powerless to control. We have childcare concerns, schedules that are impossible, relationship conflicts, physical disabilities, worries about grandchildren, mental malfunctions, and budgets that are enough for us, but not enough to support our needy extended-family members. Our anxiety is real. Our suffering is real. And, sooner or later, our death will be real.

For some folks, at least, these stresses can be so great that it feels like being abandoned by God. But Paul—whose missionary journeys led him to be jailed, beaten, flogged, betrayed, stoned, robbed, shipwrecked, and eventually martyred²—still persisted in his faith. He believed that none of that could separate him or us from God's love.

Bible scholars aren't absolutely sure where Paul was when he wrote his letter to the *Romans*. But they are quite sure that Paul was in jail when he wrote his letter to the *Philippians*. Since Paul was often beaten and whipped for his Christian proclamation, it's entirely possible that, besides being locked up, he might also have been nursing some life-threatening bodily wounds while he was there. And, yet, he wrote to the Christians in Philippi, "I will continue to rejoice, for . . . it is my eager expectation and hope that . . . Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain."³ Because of his strong sense of purpose in spreading the gospel of

Christ, there was no room for a sense of loneliness or abandonment. Whether he was suffering or well, whether he was alive or dead, Paul knew that Jesus had been raised, and Paul couldn't imagine that God's love wouldn't be there for him too.

Do you hear what Paul is saying to us today? No matter what trials and tribulations we might be facing, no matter even if we actually die, we are not alone. Nothing, nothing, nothing (!) can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

CONCLUSION

There's a Christian preacher and author named Max Lucado. One of his quotations that has become very popular is this:

If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it.
 If [God] had a wallet, your picture would be in it.
 [God] sends you flowers every spring
 and a sunrise every morning.
 Face it, friend. [God] is crazy about you!

That's what the Apostle Paul was saying too. God *is* crazy about you. God loves you so much that if God sent a valentine card, it would have your name on it. God's love is so strong, so wonderfully great, that there's no terrible thing we or anyone or anything else in all creation can do to interfere or prevent it from happening. The good news of Romans chapter eight is this. God is for us! And Jesus intercedes for us!

What then are we to say? Nothing can separate us from God's love!

¹Acts 9:4

²2 Corinthians 11:23-29 and Christian tradition.

³Philippians 1:18-21