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It's Impossible to Be Separated from God
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Romans 8:31-39:

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? The Lord who did not withhold God's only Son, but gave him up for all of us, will God not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

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.

One: This is the Word of the Lord. **ALL: Thanks be to God.**

The Apostle Paul tells us that there is nothing that can separate us from God's love. But then when life's setbacks come, we start to wonder. Romans 8 is one of those texts which provides comfort and reassurance, reminding us that God is indeed on our side, offering us support and grace.

This passage strongly asserts that God is for us. For centuries, many people have misunderstood the assertion that God is for us. What does that really mean? If we pray for our favorite sports team to win, say Virginia Tech, UVA, Carolina, or my favorite team, North Carolina State, it does not mean that God is against us if the team losses. In fact, yesterday as I watched the Wolfpack lose another game to Carolina, I was reminded of how God often does not answer the prayers of State fans. What if we do not study enough for a test at school, and then pray a few minutes before the test for a good grade? I admit I have done that before. It did not mean that God was against me or God did not hear my prayer if I happened to make a bad grade. It just meant that I made a bad grade because I didn't study enough. If things do not turn out the way that we planned, it does not mean God is against us. In fact, we often encounter God in those surprising times when things do not go according to our plans.

To say God is for us means that even when we are acting petty, God accepts us; nevertheless God wants us to let go of our jealousy precisely because God is for us and it will help us be happier and spiritually healthier. God is for us, even when we are acting like a jerk. God hopes that we demonstrate more kindness, but still loves us as we are. God is for ALL of us, even the person we may not like very much and even the person we may see as our opponent. God is for all of us.

It is one of our most basic affirmations of faith to say that God is for us. However, personal difficulties can make us doubt that good news. Bad things happen to us; we all know the pain of tragedy and of broken dreams.

As I was considering what Scripture text we needed to hear this morning, I thought of Romans 8. That is because, as a congregation, our hearts are heavy and we are grieving with the Stevens family for Andrew, who bravely fought cancer for over three and a half years before his body was finally overrun by that horrible disease on Friday morning. Despite our fervent prayers, Andrew died far too young. We are left with many questions. Here at First Presbyterian Church, we have read Romans 8 at over three-quarters of the Services of Witness to the Resurrection that I have participated in. Funerals are raw moments where we need to hear the beautiful and basic simplicity of the Gospel. Loved ones who have died leave a hole in our hearts and our lives. We want a promise, the promise, to which we can cling, in our grief. The pain of death touches all of us in some way or another. In the midst of death's emptiness, we may even wonder where God is and how to experience the joys of the heavenly kingdom.

A holy man was having a conversation with the Lord and said, "Lord, I would like to know what heaven and hell are like." The Lord led the man to two doors. He opened one of the doors and looked in. In the middle of the room was a large round table. In the middle of the table was a large pot of stew, which smelled delicious and made the holy man's mouth water. The people around the table were thin and sickly; they appeared to be famished.

They were holding spoons with very long handles that were strapped to their arms. Each found it possible to reach into the pot of stew and take a spoonful, but because the handle was longer than their arms, they could not get the spoons back into their mouths. The holy man shuddered at the sight of their misery and suffering. The Lord said, "You have seen hell."

They went to the next room and opened the door into heaven. It was exactly the same as the first one. There was a round table with the large pot of stew that made the holy man's mouth water. The people were equipped with the same long-handled spoons, but here the people were well nourished and plump, laughing and talking. The holy man said, "I don't understand."

"It is simple" said the Lord, "it requires but one skill. You see, they have learned to feed each other, while the greedy think only of themselves."

When we are going through struggles, it is tempting to retreat into our own personal hell. But we do not have to go through difficulties alone. We have each other and Christ to help pick us up. There are obstacles in life that all of us face. The question is: will let those hardships bring us down? Or will we allow God to help us face those obstacles and find creative solutions to our problems? Will we look to others, not as our competition, but as our partners?

Since we all face so many challenges today, I thought it would be helpful for me to rewrite Paul's words into our own modern day language. So I invite you to listen to my examples and to think about what obstacles tempt you to turn your attention away from God's loving purpose for your life.

Not even the seemingly endless violence in the Middle East, nor the devastation of natural disasters, nor the huge financial crisis on Wall Street, and not even the disappointment we feel when our dreams are shattered can separate us from God's love.

Not even the mounting job losses, nor the record number of foreclosures in the housing market, nor our own personal feelings of loneliness, and not even our anxiety over the future can separate us from God's love. Not even the grief we feel when a loved one dies, nor the senseless violence of a gunman who enters a school intending to hurt innocent people, nor the struggles of the impoverished, and not even the selfishness of the greedy can separate us from God's love. Not even the secrets that we are ashamed of, nor our personal flaws that make us feel unlovable, nor our own insecurities, and not even our own sin can separate us from God's love.

Do we believe that nothing can separate us from God's love? The apostle Paul believed it. Paul showed in his own life that he was convinced that nothing could separate us from God's love. He was mocked, rejected, thrown into prison on several occasions, and ultimately executed in Rome as a result of his Christian faith. Paul was willing to die in service to Christ because he knew that even the Roman's sword could not separate him from God's love. He showed in his life that he did not fear even death. Paul's words in Romans are inspirational, but the way he died in the faith offer an even more powerful testimony.

Finding the strength deep within ourselves to claim that nothing can separate us from God's love can be challenging. For example, Mary Ann Bird, in her book *The Whisper Test*, tells of growing up knowing she was different, and she hated it. She was born with a cleft palate, and when she started school, her classmates made it clear to her how she looked to others: a little girl with a misshapen lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth, and garbled speech.

When schoolmates asked, "What happened to your lip?" she'd tell them she had fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident than to have been born different. She was convinced that no one outside her family could love her.

There was however, a teacher in the second grade who the whole class adored, Mrs. Leonard. Annually the class had a hearing test. Mrs. Leonard gave the test to everyone in the class, and finally it was Mary Ann's turn. She knew from past years that as the student stood against the door and covered one ear, the teacher would whisper something, and the student would have to repeat it back, things like "The sky is blue" or "Do you have new shoes?" Mary Ann waited there for those words that God must have put in her teacher's mouth, those seven words that changed Mary Ann's life. Mrs. Leonard said, in her whisper, "I wish you were my little girl."

No matter what we are ashamed of, no matter what deformity we have on the outside or the inside, no matter what we worry will separate us from our Lord, God says to every single one us, "I wish you were my son," or "I wish you were my daughter." No power in all creation can take that away from us. Even when we die, death is not the final word. Not even death can separate us from the Lord, who welcomes us with open arms at the great heavenly banquet. Today we have a foretaste as we gather around the communion table. We are beloved children of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.