

Nothing Can Separate Us

Romans 8:38-39

Reverend Anne Benefield

Geneva, July 17, 2016

Introduction: Many people treasure the book of Romans and especially Chapter 8. In seminary, an entire course was offered on the 8th Chapter of Romans alone. I didn't take it mostly because I majored in pastoral care, but also because I wasn't strong in Greek. But love the letter to the Romans I do! The letter was written from Corinth when Paul was preparing to go to Jerusalem to bring offerings for the poor Christians in the city. After that he planned to go to Rome on his way to his first missionary trip to Spain.

Romans is a little different from other letters of Paul. He had not planted the church and wasn't writing in response to problems. Romans is more a theological treatise than a letter or a history. Paul wrote the letter sometime in 56 or 57 A.D. when he would have been in his late 50's. The character of the letter demonstrates a mature and deep faith that had been much tested.

Romans 8:38-39:

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.

Prayer: Gracious God, how joyful we are that nothing can separate us from You and Your love through Jesus Christ. Let us breathe in the truth of Your love. Amen.

We know in our minds that nothing can separate from the love of God, but deep down it's still hard to believe. We don't feel God's presence. We don't see God's work in our lives and our world. We think that God is absent.

Often children are better at spotting God than adults. Jesus pointed to children and their unquestioning faith, but not all children are unquestioning. Still even their questions assume that God has been spotted and is present in the world:

Dear God: Why isn't Mrs. God's name in the Bible? Weren't You married to her when You wrote it?

Dear God: Why did You make people talk foreign languages? It would be easier if everybody could talk English like You and me.

Dear God: If You made the sun and the moon and the stars You must have had lots of equipment.

Dear God: How come You only have 10 rules and our school has millions?

Dear God: When You made the first man did he work as good as we do now?

Dear God: There were no clouds Saturday so I think I saw Your feet. Did I really?

Dear God: I know there's a God because I go to His house on Sunday and see all the cars parked there.

Dear God: Where does yesterday go? Do You have it?

Dear God: I'm afraid of things at night more than in the day. So if You could keep the sun on longer that would be a good thing.

I've shared lists of children's questions before, but the central truth is that children do have a sense that God is with us. If we haven't found God, it is not because God is not there. And when we do encounter God, it's likely that, just like these children, we may have a question or two.

In Christ, we are never alone. Absolutely never. Nothing can separate us from God: not violence or terrorism; not financial or work problems; not disease or cancer; not the losses of loved ones, not depression, not our fear; not our disappointment. On the other hand, our success can't separate us from God either. God weeps, cheers, comforts and laughs with us.

Think about the things that you think would separate you from God. Whatever you think can separate you from God, cannot do it. When Jesus died on the cross and descended into hell, He was announcing to us that He would allow nothing to separate us from Him. And then He went further and ascended into heaven where He sits on the right hand of God and from that loving position He accepts us.

The first thing to know in this passage is that nothing can separate us from the love of God. The second thing to learn is that in Christ there is hope. We are all going to suffer and fail, that is part of life. We can't control what happens to us, but we can control how we response.

In his sermon "On Winning the Biggest Battle of Life," the Reverend Dr. Thomas Lane Butts wrote:

A few years ago there was an Associated Press story from Boston, Massachusetts, about a very unusual person. Her name is Marie Balter. At the age of 17 she was suffering severe depression and panic disorder. She was misdiagnosed as a schizophrenic and sent to Danvers State Mental Hospital where she was confined on that diagnosis for 17 years. With the help of friends and the strength of her faith, she was finally released. Her recovery was very painful and gradual, but she was determined to take charge of her life. She got an apartment, got married, earned a degree in psychology from

Salem State College and a master's degree from Harvard in administration planning and public policy. Recently, Marie Balter returned in triumph as the administrator of Danvers State Mental Hospital where she had spent 17 years as a patient.

Marie Balter took control of her life, but she didn't do it alone. She relied on God. The strength of her faith was central to her recovery. When we realize that nothing can separate us from God, we have hope. Everything doesn't depend upon us. God is with us.

Finally, we need to do is share the stories of when we experience God. That is one of the most powerful sources to remind us that God is with us always. Perhaps that is why I am so thankful that when we need guest preachers, the first people we ask are our members. Our own stories are the most powerful.

When I was in seminary, I took a course on the Holy Spirit. For the final paper we were given a choice of three documents to analyze. I chose the 1978 Presbyterian Policy Paper on the Holy Spirit. I have to admit that while I read the whole document, my paper was about the introduction, where it stated that in trying to understand the Holy Spirit we should focus on the didactic statements in the Bible not the stories of the Holy Spirit. I disagreed.

Stories speak to us where we are. One person's story can reach each of us in different ways – ways in which we can relate. I don't remember anything more about the paper except one illustration:

If I say to you, "the fruit of the Spirit is love," you can hear that and make some meaning out of it.

But, if instead I tell you the story of the father's love in the prodigal son, you can grasp the idea of love much more.

A few minutes ago, we baptized Laura Rosamund. As the baptizing pastor I had the honor of speaking to her parents about the love of God symbolized in baptism, but I pointed out that Laura would only understand the abstract love of God by experiencing the concrete love of her parents. Much of that love will be revisited in the repetition of the stories the family shares. Her parents will find ways to tell her how miraculous her birth was. They will tell her how they prayed for her to come. In hearing those stories, Laura will experience that she can trust in their love and through that love she will come to know about God's love. She will learn to trust that nothing can separate her from their love and from God's love.

In the good times, in the bad times, and in every time in between, nothing can separate us from the love of God. Amen.