

## Inescapable Love

*Romans 8:26-39 ~ Nothing Can Separate Us from God's Love*

The Rev. Sarah Fanning – July 30, 2017

When our daughter Megan was about three and a half, she had what we have since referred to as an ‘existential crisis of faith’. We were in a restaurant and she was sitting quite close to me. Then she started waving her fork around while holding it like a spear. I asked her gently to please be careful because she could hurt me badly enough to have to go to the hospital. And without warning, Megan burst into tears, sobbing with worry that she’d be left all alone.

Many of us have fears like this. As some of you shared during the children’s conversation, some of our fears are related to bugs and snakes and such.

Speaking personally, I’m not overly fond of small enclosed spaces. No matter what we are afraid of, most of our fears come to light through our dreams, or better phrased, through our nightmares. Like our daughter, at the heart of many of our fears is the fear of being abandoned and left alone.

This fear, this nightmare is a very primal one: the fear of being left alone, of being deprived on the ones who love us. That need to feel connected, to be joined to and accepted by someone who loves us, and because of that connection, being safe, is one of the deepest needs as human beings. It is little wonder we are so attracted to orphan characters in literature – from Anne of Green Gables to Frodo Baggins, from little orphan Annie to the more recent Harry Potter, we see in these plucky characters our worst fears realized and so root for them because

we are simultaneously grateful that it's not us in this predicament and at the same time, hopeful that we'd face it with the same measures of grit and grace.

Today's reading from Romans touches on this same deep need and, indeed, primal fear. Paul continues describing our life in the Spirit – life, that is, when we are joined to Christ and others via our baptism and belief. He has already announced that there is no condemnation for those in Christ and proclaimed that we are not only God's children but also God's heirs and Christ's co-heirs.

As if it couldn't get any better, Paul continues with the passage that Megan shared with us this morning, stressing that because God is for us, no one can stand against us. No one, that is, can level charges that deprive us of God's inheritance or diminish our status among God's beloved. Paul's words are incredibly stirring: "Who will bring any charge against God's elect?" and in answer to this, even when there are charges, he reminds us that "It is God who justifies."

Paul then asks, "Who is to condemn?" and again, he answers that even when we are condemned, that "it is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us"(8:33-34).

Did you hear that? Jesus – the one who preached God's kingdom and embodied God's love, the one who suffered and died on the cross and was raised again – this Jesus is now interceding for us. If this is true, then our future and hope is assured.

Paul continues, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" (v35). His answer, of course, is a resounding, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." And then comes the best part, the part so stirring that it is sometimes read at funerals: "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" (v.38-39.)

And there it is – Paul addressing our deepest needs and deepest fears, all in one fell swoop. We will not – cannot! – be separated from God. No matter what nightmares we may dream or experience, no matter where we may go or what we may do, no matter even what may be done to us, yet nothing can separate us from God. He grocery-lists over twenty threats to our well-being— suffering, weakness, frustration, bondage to decay, ignorance, trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword, death, life, angels, demons, powers, the present, the future, heights, depths, and, as if he had overlooked something, he includes "anything else in all creation." We can personalize our own lists of people, places and things that cause us fear of loss: parents, children, the boss, employees, colleagues, bad choices, public failure, private disappointments, dark dreams, anxieties, school, a bad business deal, disease, divorce, bankruptcy, a lack of a sense of purpose, a frustrating or failed call and on and on it goes.

Yet Paul is adamant: *nothing can separate us from God's love. It is inescapable.*

This isn't some pie-in-the-sky, wishful sort of thinking, nor is it some Pollyanna view of the world. Paul wasn't a travel agent describing places he'd never visited. He spoke out of deep convictions forged in his own personal experiences. After his conversion, God promised Paul that he would suffer much for his kingdom (Acts 9:15–16), and that "prison and hardship" awaited him in every city (Acts 20:23). And so it did. Brutal treatment, constant harassment, and strong opposition were his regular fare, which we can read about in his letters to the Thessalonians, and the Corinthians, to name just two (1Thess. 2:2, 2 Cor. 7:5, 1Cor. 4:11).

In the book of Acts, Luke records at least eight murder attempts on Paul's life (Acts 9:23–24, 9:29, 14:5–7, 14:19, 20:2–3, 21:31, 23:12, and 25:3). Paul compared himself and the first apostles to sheep headed to a slaughter; people in last place; public spectacles; dishonoured fools; vagrants who were hungry, thirsty, homeless, and in rags; and in those memorable words, "the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world" (1 Cor. 4:8–13). Is anyone weak without my being weak, he asked? Ultimately, Paul was martyred in Rome.

Through all of this, in all of his experiences, Paul remained insistent: nothing in all of creation can separate us from God's love.

I believe this is an important truth, not just for us to hear, but also to know, to really know, in the depths of our hearts. I have had a number of times in my

life where I've felt lost and all alone – experiencing the depths of depression; the death of our daughter Heather are just two that I can name and am willing to share. I share these, not because I wish to make an example of myself, but rather because I think we all have times that we feel alienated, separated and estranged, maybe by others or maybe by our own selves. It's easy, in those times, to forget that God's love is inescapable and unconditional. And nothing can separate us from God's love.

Moreover, it's not just God in general – who Martin Luther always held was just a wee bit terrifying – but the love of God in Christ Jesus. That's right. God loves us...forever...no matter what. That's why Jesus came: to tell us, show us, embody for us, God's love. My goodness, if there was ever a message that I think I, and we all need to hear in this fast-paced and fear-ridden modern world we live in, it's this one - our God loves us...all of us...forever...no matter what...and nothing – no, nothing! – can separate us from God's love! Amen.