

“Nothing Can Separate Us”

Romans 8:31-39

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I have learned to trust my tears. When I feel them coming on, I just let them come. I start out my day with two hankies, one in each pocket, just in case. I try to follow the trail of my tears backward to their source. They usually take me to my soul. My tears tell me that something that matters has been touched.

It is hard for me to read Paul’s Letter to the Romans without these ancient words touching my soul. He writes,

“For I am sure that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

In a way, this profound statement of faith has been the foundation of my own faith. Paul has not only been my teacher; he also has been the potter who has shaped the substance of my belief.

As I read the names of those who have died over the past year, I am instantly aware of the love we shared and how that love is still operative in my life. I know they have died. I am not in denial about that. Yet, they are so present to me in ways that language is inadequate to describe. I just know beyond a doubt that death has not separated us from each other. When I catch myself shying away from something difficult, Marie Calvin is there to encourage me. When I catch myself wondering if I can hang on for another year or two, Myles Covey is there cheering me on. When I start feeling sorry for myself, John Bisset is there to turn my attitude around. Surely it is true, love knows no bounds. Is this not the essence of the Good News of the Gospel?

When Paul wrote to his friends in the Roman church, he did so as a pastor who knows the flock. He knew they were facing discouraging times, times of persecution and separation from family. They didn't know from day to day who would survive and who would perish. He feared they would lose hope and turn away from their new found faith. Many of them had reached the proverbial "pit" of existence; not certain of anything anymore. So he writes words that come out of his own life struggle, out of his own heart, out of his own Resurrection faith. He writes words they can trust.

“Not angels, nor principalities, 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.”

I try to picture the Roman church members receiving this epistle, maybe holding hands with each other in a circle, maybe smiling, maybe needing a hankie, but certainly feeling assured by this eternal truth.

Perhaps my all-time favorite movie is “Places in the Heart” with Sally Fields. In this film there is a ton of violence: physical and emotional and spiritual. It's hard to watch. Many people are wounded. Relationships are damaged. Some of the characters die and some live. The final scene takes us to the local church in rural Texas where this story is told. The choir sings softly, “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine.” We hear the voice of the pastor saying the familiar words of the Communion meal, “The body of Christ, broken for you.” We see the trays of bread and wine passed from pew to pew among the parishioners. What we are not prepared for is the presence of those who have died. Both the shooter and the one shot are sitting side by side in the back row. They have both died, but they are both there! One is White; one is Black.

One hands the sacrament to the other saying, “The peace of God be with you.” It is a sacred sharing.

It is a stirring affirmation that nothing; not death or race or even violence, is able to separate us from the God who loves us all. I try to watch this film at least once a year. It brings the power of Paul’s words into my bones. I own a copy and I’d gladly lend it to you!

I am glad that the Banner of the Saints falls on a Communion Sunday. The two are inextricably woven together. For, at the table, we encounter the communion of saints; that is, we find ourselves in the presence of loved ones who have lived and died. Christ himself is here at the table. My brother, Bob, is here. Jean Ramaker is here. Ivor Hugh is here. The list goes on and on.

Though at South Church we tend to get wrapped up in the mission side of Christianity, the servant side, the side that calls us into the trenches to feed hungry people and to build houses with Habitat for Humanity; there is a mystical dimension of our faith that we encounter at the Communion table. At the table, there is a certain transcendence. Time is suspended. Here, we have access to the wisdom of our parents and grandparents and great grandparents. Here, we have access to fellowship with disciples of every generation. Here, we claim the truth proclaimed by the Apostle Paul to the church in Rome:

Nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

And this, ultimately, is why I remain in the greatest of hope.
Amen.

