

Love: The Greatest Gift!
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 Seattle First Baptist Church
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Romans 8:26-39 (NRSV)

Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose. For those whom God foreknew God also predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ, in order that Jesus might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom God predestined God also called; and those whom God called God also justified; and those whom God justified God also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? God who did not withhold God's own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will God not with Jesus 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 the One 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.

I would like to read part of this passage again from Eugene Peterson's *The Message* (a paraphrased translation)

So, what do you think? With God on our side like this, how can we lose? If God didn't hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our

condition and exposing Godself to the worst by sending God's own Son, is there anything else God wouldn't gladly and freely do for us? And who would dare tangle with God by messing with one of God's chosen? Who would dare even to point a finger? The One who died for us—who was raised to life for us—is in the presence of God at this very moment sticking up for us. Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in scripture...

None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I'm absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Lord has embraced us. The word of God for the people of God. Thanks, be to God!

I would like to spend a few minutes talking about Love: The Greatest Gift.

I realize I am departing from the norm of focusing on the gospel lectionary reading for my message today. I am taking my text from Romans a book written by the Apostle Paul. When I realized Romans 8 was also one of the lectionary scriptures for the day, I was compelled to focus on this chapter, because Roman 8:38-39 are my favorite verses in the entire bible.

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.

Many preachers prefer to stick to the gospels or the Psalms when it comes to preaching and steer clear of Paul's letters. Some think the gospels can be preached without much controversy since our faith is rooted in the way of Jesus. Yet if one takes the gospels seriously, and asks the question who is my neighbor; and if one reads the gospels with Micah's heart asking what does the Lord require of us but to do justice love kindness and to walk humbly with God; then the gospels will be controversial and be the source of great conviction.

Paul and his writings have always been controversial. Way back in the day, my foremothers and forefathers didn't want to hear anything that Paul had to say. Womanist theologian Dr. Katie Geneva Canon, would say those

enslaved practiced a hermeneutic of suspicion. Since Paul wrote, **slaves be obedient to your master**, and that biblical text was preached to those who were regularly beaten, raped, and torn from family, then everything Paul wrote was suspect and my ancestors didn't want to hear any of it.

Paul also wrote, women be silent in the church. So, for many women who could think a complete thought and form their own opinions, Paul was of dubious character. Since Paul wrote derogatory words about same gender loving people, then for many lgbtq people and their allies, he has nothing of value to say to them in any of his letters.

Paul was controversial 2000 years ago when he persecuted those who followed Jesus. He subsequently had his Damascus experience and did a 180-degree conversion and became a friend and encourager of those he once persecuted. So, there was plenty controversy that surrounded Paul even in his day. Some folks had reservations about Paul because he wasn't one of the original 12 disciples yet he expected the same authority as the one of the 12. He never mentioned in his letters the great works of Jesus that the gospel writers shared yet he felt his letters were worthy of instruction for the struggling new faith community.

Yet despite all the baggage that surrounded Paul and his writings, we have this powerful declaration of God's passion for each of us in Romans 8. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. We may have to dig a bit to find words that Paul wrote that speak to our hearts, but they are in the book. And, even for me there are quite a few gems in his letters that feed my soul. If it has been a while since you read some good stuff from Paul, I encourage you to read Philippians this week. Then send me an email and let me know what you think.

With all the roller coaster events of this past week, it is good to hear words of assurance that God is with us and continues to have a mighty love for us no matter what. God loves us individually and collectively. It has been a rough week for our trans-friends and those of us who love them. It is unfathomable that the President would say there is no place for them in the military service of our country. And if that message was not insulting enough, he had the nerve to deliver his bigotry in three outrageous tweets. It is in moments like this that I recall the words of my aunties, **God don't like ugly**. No one can mess over God's people and get away with it. #45 may be pandering to his base, but my God has a bigger base. The

Psalmist said, The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof the world and they that dwell therein. Somebody say amen!

To my trans-friends, God's got this. One man can't resurrect hatred and turn back the clock on bigotry. We are a better country than that and we won't stand for it—not even the Joint Chiefs of Staff Chair General Joseph Dunsforth.

One of the strategies of those interested in amassing power, is to keep those with less power fighting among themselves. If we can keep groups separate and warring against one another, then we prevent coalition building and moving toward the realm of God. If the Black Lives Matter movement is pitted against the LGBTQ movement, equal rights and justice for all is just a dream. If affordable health care is pitted against immigration reform, then bigotry prevails and only the wealthy get in this country and only the privileged can afford medical care.

If climate change advocates are pitted against business interests, the planet heats up, storms prevail, and businesses are destroyed. If evangelical Christians and progressive Christians keep blaming one another about declining church attendance and arguing about what a real Christian believes then the work of the Church never gets done, God is not glorified, and the Church becomes irrelevant in the lives most people.

Our collective power is weakened when we fight against one another. We must #resist the power of the Enemy that keeps us fighting one another. Paul reminds us that while flesh and blood, and principalities and powers want to keep us separate and at odds with one another, nothing can separate us from God.

Bullies try to drive wedges between those who would naturally be allies. But Paul wants us to know that that strategy will not work with God. Nothing can separate us from the love of God--not politics not denominational polity, not theological bigotry, not immigration status, not economic conditions. Nothing can wedge its way between God's love and us. That's good news.

It is not always something beyond ourselves that undermines our relationship with God. Sometimes we are our worst enemy. Our self-doubt and second guessing, can get in the way of God working in our lives.

Maybe I shouldn't have gotten married. Maybe I shouldn't have applied for that job. Maybe I should have given him more money. Maybe I should have moved to another state. Let the self-doubt and the shoulds go. You did the best you could with the information you had at the time. Trust God, forgive yourself if you need to, and keep moving forward.

Past mistakes, shameful errors, and guilt, try to prevent us from experiencing the fullness of God's love. But, they can't. Neither can a crazy family, a messy divorce, domestic violence, heroin addiction, incarceration, physical or emotional disabilities, years of unemployment, nor financial ruin can keep God's love away. God's love and favor does not depend upon us. Here's a news flash, none of us is worthy. But, it is not about us, it is all about God. Somebody say, ***it's about God.***

Now, everybody is not going to love you like God loves you. People are fickle and people change. So, when you are looking for a real love that will not disappoint or change, don't even bother looking in the club—try God.

When you are tempted to say, I am all alone and no one cares—when the violins of your pity party start tuning up--go back to Romans 8: 38-39 and read it over and over until you are 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.

This is the word of the Lord. And today if you hear God's voice do not harden your hearts, but open your hearts and receive Love: The Greatest Gift.

Please stand as you are able and sing our closing hymn #43 Loves Divine,
All Loves Excelling