

Sermon on the Best Verse of the Bible
(30July17)

Romans 8:26-39; Matt 13:31-33, 44-52

A couple weeks ago as we gathered for staff meeting, Jen was consterned and consternated (both!) about what seemed to her a trite lyric from a kids' song that said, "If God is for us, who can be against us?!" I instantly blurted, "That's from Romans 8! The best chapter in the Bible!" At which point, the staff sort of stared at me, maybe generally surprised that there *is* a best chapter in the Bible, or that I thought everybody should know which that is.

It should go without saying that not all Bible passages are created equal. Nobody would argue that Leviticus 18 is as vital as Psalm 23. You'd be silly to the point of offensive if you claimed the "wives be subject to your husbands" of Ephesians 5 was at all comparable to Easter resurrection of Jesus in Matthew 28. As folks who are reading through the Bible this year are all-too-regularly reminded, plenty in there is hardly worth reading. But other stuff is so important—the best of news!—that we want to keep re-reading it or hearing it again and again.

With that, I'd say that Romans 8 is the top of the heap. If we were left on a desert island with only one chapter of the Bible (it's a frequently raised puzzle), this would be the one to pick. And this passage today especially. In fact, the last verse of the reading, I would call the culmination of the Bible's whole message: **nothing is able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.** This verse could itself be construed as the mustard seed, the yeast that gives rise to everything else, the pearl of great value. I really hope it sounds almost unfathomably good to you, and gives you a little shiver it feels so wonderfully surprising to discover.

But if not, well, that's where some of my challenge lies. If this is the best Bible passage and the most important for you to hear, then I'd wish this would be my best sermon. (In that regard, I'm not off to a very good start.) More, we've been listening to Romans 8 for three straight weeks now, but rather than a sense of you saying "wow" or "ooh, ahh," I've instead had numerous conversations about the confusion. Even though I haven't gotten to unpack any of it in preaching, I've tried to make it closer to a zero-entry wade-in Kiddy pool instead of the roaring ocean depths. To help you appreciate what you're hearing today, last week we did the section as a paraphrase and dialogue, so your own voice could capture and hold onto the persevering hope and you could acknowledge in your very being that you have been adopted as children of God. The week before, instead of the usual New Revised Standard Version, we used a different translation that I further adapted, trying to help this in your ears.

Before that, this is actually the seventh straight week proceeding through Romans. It's hard to hold onto that continuity when it's separated by a week inbetween worship services, harder still with summer schedules that pull us elsewhere. This chunk today is the crest of an eight-chapter-long wave in Paul's deliberation, an enormous moment of resolution to a conundrum.

Which points to another hard part of this: it isn't a story. It's not a nice narrative. This is thick theological pondering. Paul has been working through huge questions like: who are insiders and who are outsiders and what does the story of the Old Testament tell us about that? What can get us into trouble with God and what can rescue us from that? How well do we need to behave, what is supposed to help us behave, and why does it remain so hard to behave? Why do we suffer, why is there suffering in the

world? All of that is finally and in some way entirely addressed by this: **nothing is able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

If you're having trouble wrapping your mind around that vast arc of Romans, here's one specific example of this sweep through the book, from that start up to today's final verse: chapter 1 portrays sin and falling away from God and, in that, Paul happens to use a term that gets interpreted related to homosexuality. That place in chapter 1 has then been used in arguments to say that sex can separate you from the love of God, even though the reason Paul raises it way back there at the start of the letter is so that at this point in chapter 8 he can say "No!" **there's NOTHING that can separate you from the love of God.** You'd think we could have that core message sink in and people could shut up about how evil this or that is and how it must condemn a person to hell. But the good news is continually interrupted and so desperately in need of reinforcement.

An obvious personal place to begin is in thinking of what's been problematic in your relationships lately, where you know what your faults are or where somebody thinks they are: your stubbornness and impatience, that you work too much or too little, that you're not quite trustworthy, a little dishonest, where you got angry or you just didn't care. Amid any of those problems, still here it comes: **nothing is able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

Less hypothetically, I'll confess I picture faces with that. This past week I've been living alongside relationships breaking down and the fracturing of our human commitments and promises because of fights, and because of neglect, and because of dementia, and because of death. All those are wrong, and even as those dearest relationships and places you most

wanted love to be true may fail, still here it comes: **nothing is able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.**

Or if you're not relating to individual brokenness and accusations of falling short and can't see those in yourself, then think about us as a larger group and the hungry people we didn't feed, the sick we haven't been visiting with compassion, those we left locked up in something, those people or creatures from whom we took away life instead of helping and the way we worsen creation's groaning. Yet, even when we recognize ourselves as too wealthy, too consumeristly-driven by comfort or convenience, too violent, too privileged and white, too mainstream, and could not be labeled as authentically Christian, still here it comes: **nothing is able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

Again, from the theoretical to very direct examples, we have people among us—in our very congregation, you must hear me say—who need housing and are amid the crisis of homelessness when they should not be. Farther away, but still near to my heart, my dear friend Ali in Jerusalem reports worry for his fellow Palestinians during the standoff that kept Muslims out of the Dome of the Rock complex, and I have to realize that conflict should have no reason to have lasted so long, last month marking 50 years since the Six-Day War. Or, again, I'm haunted by images of the squirrel that died in my yard last week, and haunted by the terror of my farmer Tony of Scotch Hill Farm belaboring that the destructive rains are climactic change that we've brought on ourselves. Yet still, here it comes: **nothing is able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.** God won't be stopped by any alleged impossibilities.

But if that seems almost incomprehensibly huge, then think about what's just not right in

life. This is a big deal, because Paul is talking about what makes us right with God. So if things aren't going right, that would ultimately concern our relationship with God. Think about illnesses, your uncertainties about how to live, what your purpose is, the doubts and struggles, the sadness, being too busy, when life doesn't feel very special, when you're bored or unimpressed, everywhere things just don't quite go as they ought. Those aren't indications you've been forsaken or that you're fatally on the wrong path. If anything, these may become sacramental moments to serve as reminders, mementos, and more deeply reassure you that—here it comes—**nothing is able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus**. No matter how wrong you tell me I am, still my core identity cannot be changed: I am loved by God.

For those of you whose brains are built around storytelling, it might be that if I said more about any one of the specific examples I've listed, then you'd feel like you'd better appropriated and retained the message of love, that you were holding it more clearly. But Paul isn't working in individual specifics. He's not spinning a yarn or dabbling in metaphor or unfolding a narrative constructed for specific examples. He doesn't want you to come away saying, "well, of course nothing about their gender identity separates them from the love of God in Christ Jesus." Neither should you to say it about somebody's race or health or productivity or church attendance or nationality or marriage status or income or criminal record or job or political persuasion or attitude just because you heard a story about them that addressed an isolated instance. So much more, Paul wants you to hear it for you, and to live into this framework that's bigger than your story or any story, a framework with all of creation groaning, yearning, hoping, being born

into a new reality. That is why Paul arrives at this point and proclaims the most abundant good news, and here it comes once more: **nothing is able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus**.

With that, if you're thinking this conditionless love means none of those wrongs matter, that it absolves your opponents of all they've done to harm you and is forgetful about your own lackluster history, if that's how this love seems...then you've got it exactly right.

But you still probably haven't really appreciated it yet. If you become skeptical that this just whitewashes over the difficulty, then you're not giving due credit to what love means and does in our lives. That complexity is exactly what Paul has been trying to help you comprehend, the ins and outs of how this love is unstoppably functioning in your life and across this world. And so—with him—I'm hoping we can continue to discover how we live into this love.