

“Nothing Can Separate Us”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
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**Romans 8: 26-39**

One of the realities of being the pastor of small to medium-size churches is that I have led a lot of funerals. In the church I served in Charlotte, North Carolina, in four-and-a-half years I officiated at four weddings and 25 funerals. I cannot give you specific numbers on that breakdown in 17-and-a-half years here at John Knox, but it is likely a similar ratio. And honestly, I believe that is more and more the case at most mainline Protestant churches in the United States. As our population ages, the number of young adults who join the church is not enough to compensate for the deaths we experience.

When I was discerning where to first serve in ministry in Charlotte, I had a choice between serving as an associate pastor at a larger church or serving as a solo pastor at a small congregation. I’m sure if I had started my ministry as an associate pastor, my experiences with weddings and funerals would have been different. At larger churches, you have more weddings due to larger numbers of young adults and a facility that is attractive for those celebrations. Who knows - perhaps that would have shaped my ministry in a very different way.

But I’ve never regretted that choice I made twenty-two-years ago to serve as a solo pastor, for I believe that was the path God intended for me to take. That doesn’t mean I haven’t had the joy of celebrating weddings with families – I have, and they’ve been memorable and life-giving moments in ministry. They just haven’t been as numerous as the funerals – and that’s perfectly alright with me. Those experiences with families as they navigate end-of-life moments have been sacred times for me as a pastor. And they have prepared me for those moments of loss in my own life, so that I know even more deeply the yearning for hope amid such drastic loss and change.

If there is one passage of scripture which I have used more often than any other at the time of a funeral it is this passage from Romans 8. While 1 Corinthians 13 is often considered the go-to scripture for weddings, this passage from Romans is most often associated with services of witness to the resurrection. I can honestly say that it has become my personal testimony of faith. In a succinct, encompassing fashion, Paul speaks the essence of the Christian faith: “Nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

But for the hundreds of times that I have preached on this passage at a funeral – and we will use it again this Thursday when we celebrate the life of Dorothy Dedrick – do you want to hear something ironic?

Today is the first time I have preached on this passage on a Sunday morning. My guess is that in the past, when this scripture has come up in the lectionary cycle of readings, I have passed over it because of its frequent use at funerals. But this year is different, to be sure. Perhaps for that reason, I felt drawn to what this familiar passage has to say to us today – in the midst of a time of great uncertainty, change, and anxiety. Maybe now more than ever, we need to hear that familiar affirmation of faith, that nothing can separate us from God’s love in Jesus Christ.

I do want to mention one disclaimer here: I’m not going to delve into predestination in this sermon! Verses 28-30 focus on this very Presbyterian theological idea, one which requires a series of sermons, not just a few paragraphs in one message. For what we are all living through now, I’d like us to center ourselves on the other parts of the passage that Paul shares, especially as it relates to the challenges we face in life, and how God never leaves us amid those difficulties.

Paul begins this passage acknowledging that life is hard, and in our weakness we can rely on God’s strength. “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” (8:26). We don’t have to face life’s challenges alone – God’s Spirit undergirds us with love and grace. And God is not somewhere all alone, distant from us; God is close and near. “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” (8:27). God’s very nature speaks to us when we most need comfort and solace.

And it is in a series of rhetorical questions that Paul makes his argument for God’s never-ending love. “If God is for us, who is against us?” We will never be overcome since God is on our side. “Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who indeed intercedes for us.” Our judgment is not found at the hands of fellow humans; it is through the sacrificial love we know in Jesus Christ. It is in these questions and answers that Paul reassures us that God is on our side, sentiments which are especially powerful and meaningful when we are facing death’s stark reality.

David Greenhaw writes: *Beyond the liturgical setting of a funeral, this text has much to offer. It speaks not solely of death, but of many matters that threaten separation. Separation is a genuine issue in our lives . . . Every choice we make along the way necessarily separates us from some other option. We cannot do everything, and so, when we do anything, we must exclude something. Such exclusion, such “leaving behind,” is a source of great pain in human living. Even the most natural thing, like growing up, involves leaving something behind. One cannot become an adult without leaving childhood behind. One does not stay young forever, and so we leave behind our young adulthood with all its brimming potential. Nearly everyone understands that, in the usual*

*course of things, one's parents will die before he or she does. We raise our own children with a full expectation that they will go away from us, step out on their own.*

*At the very heart of what it means to be human is separation from those things and those people we love . . . To be human is to have loss and grief. No one is able to escape loss and grief. Anyone who has remotely loved anyone or anything will suffer the grief of loss and will know the painful power of separation* (David Greenhaw, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2011: 278-280).

The power of separation is very real for us today, isn't it? Today we celebrate those in our church who have graduated from high school, college, and seminary. And while there is much that is joyful about these milestones in life, there is also the realization that change is occurring. It is time to leave behind what has been familiar, and to step out into something new, which is exciting, terrifying, and unknown, all at the same time.

In this time of anxiously awaiting daily case counts and yearning for physical contact with those we love, the power of separation is very real and ever-more painful when we experience death. Debbie's two aunts, Sara Stallings and Charlotte Chadwick, sisters of Debbie's late-father, have died during this pandemic over the last three months. We have not been able to gather as a family to celebrate their lives, postponing such memorials until an undetermined future date. Because of this time of physical separation, it's almost as if emotionally we can't comprehend that they are gone. Debbie's cousin, Ruth, had not seen her mother, Charlotte, in-person since March 8, and was not present with her when she died. And our experience is indicative of so many others, including many of you who have experienced grief and loss during this pandemic. The power of separation is real and hard.

Greenhaw continues: *The portrayal of the powers that cause separation is part of the genius of the eighth chapter of Romans. Paul understands the conflict of cosmic forces that cause separation. He lists many of the forces. One of the first he mentions is hardship (8:35) . . . The hardness of life, the struggle it presents us nearly every day, is easy to pass over, but difficult ultimately to ignore . . .*

*Paul's list of those things that separate continues. It includes distress. Distress is a frequent force in our lives. When we cannot complete what we so want to finish, we are in distress. When we have done all that we can do, and it is still not enough, we are in distress. Like the waters flowing over a sinking ship, distress overwhelms us.*

*(Paul's list goes on, including persecution), "famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword." The forces that cause separation are many. The weight of all the forces that bring separation into our lives would appear to tip a scale completely over. Few, if any, do not know the weight of those powers; so, it is most remarkable when Paul proclaims to these*

*powers loudly and firmly: “No.” Shall these things prevail? Shall these things have the capacity to undo us, to undo the most central element of our lives – God’s love? No, no, no! Paul makes a confession. He is convinced, he says, that nothing will prevail against God’s love. The conflict of the powers is engaged head-on, and the victor is God’s love (ibid).*

When we are distressed by ever-increasing anxiety because of a seemingly never-ending pandemic, and we struggle to have hope, Paul says, “No, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”

When the world judges us and labels us because of what we look like, who we love, or what we believe, and we struggle to have hope, Paul says, “Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus who intercedes for us.”

When we feel isolated and alone, far from friends, colleagues, and family, and we feel separated even from God, Paul vehemently proclaims, “I am convinced that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Hold onto that confession with all your might, especially when life feels like it’s spinning out of control. For nothing can separate you from God’s love – nothing at all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.