

“Who Will Separate Us...?”

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Scripture: Romans 8:26-39

The Rev. William T. Hennessy

A story in the newspaper this past week tells of a boy, five years old, who was playing in his yard with a toy bow and arrow. There was a fatal accident when the boy fell on the bow. It's the kind of loss I cannot even begin to imagine. How devastating for his parents and relatives and friends. I was shaken when I read about it. But I was stunned by his parents' act of love when they agreed to donate their son's organs so that others might have a chance at life. My sense from the article was that his parents found a great deal of comfort and peace in their decision.

Another devastating loss occurred a couple of years ago when a man with a gun entered an Amish schoolhouse. It was a horrible act of violence by a deeply troubled man. You may remember how that Amish community dealt with this tragedy. They prayed for the man's family, his widow and children. Then several of them, about 70 I think, attended his funeral to show support and comfort even as they were mourning their own children.

This passage from Romans is one I have read many, many times. Usually I've read it at funerals. Somehow it lends itself to those moments when we experience loss. These words are intended to offer assurance; assurance for folks who find themselves in troubling circumstances. Paul had never met the Christian community at Rome. He didn't have the same sort of relationship with them that he had with so many other groups to whom he wrote. So he doesn't have any specific hardship in mind. But he does understand how quickly the circumstances of our lives can cut us off from communion with God.

So even though Paul may not know what the Christians in Rome are enduring, he knows they're enduring something, just as we all must endure something at some point in our lives that can threaten to separate us from God's love. Yet do you hear how unequivocal he is? “Neither death, nor life, nor 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 in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Now, I tend to keep away from absolute claims. I'm not comfortable with them I suppose because I know how precarious, how provisional life can be. But this is a claim I am willing to pin all my hopes on.

I say that not because I've never experienced loss because I have. And not because I've never been disappointed because I've gone through deep disappointments in my life. So I certainly will never tell you that life in Christ protects us from harm. I know better and so do you. Nevertheless, I am convinced of Paul's words. God will not, will not, withdraw from us; will not abandon us no matter how difficult our lives might become. Like the old hymn says:

The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to its foes.
That soul though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no never, no never forsake.

Now I know there's the danger of sounding Pollyannaish when we make a claim like this. It can be hard to believe God is with us when we're surrounded by so much that tells us otherwise. The world is so filled with injustice and pain, how can we blithely claim we're inseparable from God's love? Well, I don't suppose it's something we can say blithely. I don't think the parents of that boy made their decision lightly. They made it out of their conviction that not even that loss, horrible as it is, can separate them from God's love. Likewise the members of that Amish community in Pennsylvania: Surrounding the widow of the man who did such a horrible thing to them was an expression of their deeply held belief that love goes on and is the only faithful response when life threatens to undo us.

Those aren't convictions we arrive at suddenly or by accident. They are cultivated within us through lives spent seeking to live in communion with God. St. John of the Cross, the 16th century Christian mystic, believed that the spiritual life is manifested in three ways: tranquility, gentleness and strength. In the face of adversity of every kind, when we are living in communion with God, our response will be tranquility, gentleness and strength. These are the qualities shown by the parents of that little boy, the qualities shown by that Amish community. And these are the qualities we're invited to discover within ourselves.

That discovery can take a long, long time. And we may go down many false paths in our pursuit. Life will continue to be filled with hardships of every kind, make no mistake about that. So we'll stumble along the way. We'll sink from time to time into anxiety or hostility or weakness. But not even our own shortcomings can separate us from God's love. That love will continue to sustain us. And if we have the tenacity and courage to hang onto it we will find ways to extend that love to those around us, to embrace those who reject us.

I'm convinced this is the heart and soul of our faith: God's love revealed in Christ extended to a world longing to be whole. Seek the path of God's love and cling to the promise, no matter what hardship you might endure, that God is for you and will not let you go.

Amen