

“NOTHING WILL SEPARATE US FROM THE LOVE OF GOD THAT IS IN CHRIST JESUS”

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Romans 8: 35-38NRSV

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Paul's letter to the Roman church is different from his other letters. He's not trying to resolve a conflict or sort out a problem. Paul isn't responding to the people he's writing to. Instead he is saying "This is my faith, and here's the theology behind it."

And while you might think that the passage we read today with that line I just started with would make a great ending for him, he actually goes on for ANOTHER 8 chapters! It's a long letter of theology, considering Jesus hasn't been crucified and risen for very long - - about 60 years. Where did all this theology come from? Well, doing theology is like the sour dough starter—once you get it going it has a life of its own and you have to keep giving it away to people.

But this passage from Romans 8 is one of those that has never failed any generation of believers since. I remember writing it into my United Church buddy's year book in high school and he thanked me weeks later because he didn't know it all before that, and now he was so glad to have it.

Nothing will separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

But before Paul draws that conclusion he takes the time to write a list of things that might come up in life as possible contenders, proclaiming that

“Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation,” ... Ain't no mountain high enough, ain't no valley low enough, ain't no river wide enough to keep God's love from us! (This may be where Marvin Gaye got his inspiration!)

It's a handy list because in every lifetime some of those things will come off the page and into our lives in the worst way, suggesting they CAN separate us from God's love—that they ARE separating us from God's love.

We are living in times when that is happening for some people. We're always living in times like that. Things have come off the page—lack of safety, life and death, loss of trust in leaders, questions of faith, church, and God, sins of the past and present and how much they have cost us, anxiety for the future, greed and brute selfishness in the use of power, fear turning people into cowards, turning an emergency into reasons to think only of ourselves when we could look after each other too, forgetting that those coming after us may know better than we do what is needed, that in spite of how our United Church creed begins — we begin to wonder if we could be alone after all—for some an abyss has opened between their life and God's love. And the consequences hurt everyone.

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Let's stop for a moment, and listen to our own lives. What are the voices that want to separate you from God's love? You might still believe in God, God's love sounds like a good idea more than it feels like a real thing. What nudges you to that place of separation? Are you there now?

Last week I said that ministry is marinating in trauma. That trauma comes in different packages and for different reasons. Most of us put our lives back together after traumatic events and press on to make the best life that we can. But over time, we are less and less able to do that. Death, life, angels, rulers, things present, things to come, powers, height, or depth, or the 'anything else in all creation', keep peeling away our resilience, and starts us in a freefall. A horrible fear that God's love will never be there to catch us again, or the fear that if it does catch us—it won't be able to hold us.

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What if the freefall isn't the absence of God's love at all? What if it's the teeth clenching white-knuckled moment of realizing how much we really need God's love--and this might be the first time we've realized just how much. Before this maybe God's love was a nice accessory to the life we'd put together. All that was missing was a spiritual home décor item. God's love. Nice touch. We're done.

But when we're in freefall, we need God's love because it's the reason we have a life at all.

Freefall is terrifying ... but whatever it is that pushes us over the edge is not God's boss. Neither death or life, or angels or rulers or things present or things to come or height or depth of anything in all creation is in charge of God's love. Our freefall and the reasons for it don't change God's love. Nobody tells God's love to step back. Nobody and Nothing tells God's love what to do. Nobody.

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A friend in ministry from the Anglican church, the Rev. Anna Greenwood-Lee in Calgary, does these great 2-minute sermons on Vimeo. A recent one she gave grabbed hold of me in my freefall brought by the chaos of our dear neighbours to the south where I have many dear friends and colleagues. She said quite simply, that love and justice will save the world. Nothing else will do it, but nothing else is needed, either. Love and justice will save the world.

I stopped freefalling. The news was still hard to bear. The losses were still real. The uncertainties had not been resolved. The future still had me worried. But it felt like I had just remembered the most important thing again, the one thing that would keep me going, step by step, moment by moment, into this life with commitment and real hope, knowing love and justice will save the world. And *Nothing will separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.*

Nothing IS separating us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

Ministry may be marinating in trauma, our lives may be nudging into a freefall, but the decision to love this world has been made. God has made it. It has been revealed in Jesus. And confirmed by the Spirit. There is no stepping back for God. It's in play all the time, unconditionally.

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