

Sermon

Romans 8:31-39

June 7, 2015

In face of all this, what is there left to say? If God is for us, who can be against us? God did not hesitate to spare His own Son but gave him up for us all - can we not trust such a God to give us, with Jesus, everything else that we can need? Who would dare to accuse us, whom God has chosen? The judge Himself has declared us free from sin. Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ, and Christ died for us, Christ rose for us, Christ reigns in power for us, Christ prays for us! Can anything separate us from the love of Christ? Can trouble, pain or persecution? Can lack of clothes and food, danger to life and limb, the threat of force of arms? Indeed some of us know the truth of the ancient text: 'For your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter'. No, in all these things we win an overwhelming victory through Jesus who has proved His love for us. I have become absolutely convinced that neither death nor life, neither messenger of Heaven nor monarch of earth, neither what happens today nor what may happen tomorrow, neither a power from on high nor a power from below, nor anything else in God's whole world has any power to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord! *J.B. Phillips New Testament Translation*

Today's scripture is a continuation of last week's scripture; part of the Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Rome. Paul was instructing the young church about the Holy Spirit: God's presence with us and in us. Paul (to my post-modern sensibilities) wrote to the church often with discomfiting theology.... some of it from his cultural understanding, that continues to influence our culture some 2,000 years later. For instance, Paul's cultural understanding was that women were inferior, and couldn't be leaders, and that their real contribution was to be silently submissive, still bites at the heels of women around the world. But in spite of our differences, I have grown to love Paul. He understood God's presence and participation in human suffering in a way that continues to comfort and confound me. Paul believed that God suffers with us and that when suffering has beaten us up and left us lying in the street, bleeding and broken, God is still with us; and in the Holy Spirit, God is present *in* us, praying for our redemption, our release from these present troubles.

It's hard to imagine, because of the ways we worship the physical world and its pleasures and rewards (beautiful cars, beautiful women, beautiful clothes) that there is another world more beautiful and more real. Some of us would call it heaven [point upwards] and although we probably would agree that it's a great place, none of us is in a rush to visit. That beautiful world is not "up there" however, Paul tells us, but in here [point to heart.] Paul tells us that God's Holy Spirit lives in us and gives us courage and hope and strength, and again, when we are hanging on by our fingernails, pretty sure that we will fall into the abyss of suffering, the Holy Spirit is praying in us and for us.

Yesterday's "Wired Word" which is the curriculum the Men's Breakfast uses (current news with a theological response) was about the \$100 million worth of apples Washington state apple farmers let rot in their fields because of the labor disputes in west coast ports. Apple farmers were criticized for their action, but they had a surplus of apples and no place to send them. This isn't the entire story nor is it the theological reflection... if you'd like to see that, talk to Ralph, who sends out the "Wired Word" each week. (Something interesting from the "Wired Word" reflection is that France has passed a law banning grocery stores from throwing out unsold food. It has to either be immediately donated to charities to feed the poor, or what's inedible must go to agricultural purposes.) What grabbed me from this news story was the idea of a surplus of something (apples in this case.) Surplus means too much. An over-abundance. An excess of what is required.

And here we intersect with Paul's letter to the young church. This pericope from the letters is about suffering, and about the abundance (the surplus) of God's love for us. Paul was well acquainted with suffering. He must have suffered guilt over his

zealous harassment and persecution of Jesus' followers in his previous life, before he came to know Christ. He must have suffered having to give up his self-importance and status as a prosperous, learned, and accomplished Jew to become a poor, itinerant Christian teacher and preacher. He did suffer. Hunger, beatings, imprisonment, ridicule, and death-threats. And he understood suffering as a means of grace. Because even in suffering Paul knew himself to be chosen as God's own, to be redeemed from sin, and hell, and death, by Jesus Christ, and to be sustained by the living presence of the Holy Spirit. Paul could write with confidence and authority that nothing in all creation has the power to separate us from God's love because that's what Paul had experienced.

In his letter Paul listed the circumstances that could have the devil's own destructive power to sever the covenant love God has for us. Every one of us could make our own list of potential threats that have must (seem) to have the power to separate us from God's love. Paul includes death and all devastating losses; life itself with its hardships and heartaches; being distracted and seduced by heavenly visions and angelic ecstasy; anyone or anything that demands our adoration and allegiance; and nothing in our past, nothing in the present, and nothing in our future... no-thing, Paul believed, can sever or lessen the surplus of God's love for us. Nothing in all creation, nothing in all the world, can stop God from loving us. That's not something God chooses.

Juxtaposed to Paul's understanding of the surplus of God's love, is our own cultural understanding that there is not enough to go around. Not enough new toys - cars, clothes, beauty products, electronics, not enough *stuff* - not enough oil... not enough kindness, or tolerance... and not enough love for people who are different from

us. And so we, the church, even though we have experienced the abundance of God's love for us, withhold love (in the form of intolerance and unkindness and judgment) from Muslims, or Democrats, or Republicans, or same-sex couples, or anyone we deem as being wrong, or unworthy, of the surplus of God's love.

I wonder what it was like for J.B. Phillips, the Anglican vicar who translated Paul's letter from ancient texts into modern English (this is his translation that we heard this morning) during the blitz in London. While German enemy bombs fell, destroying much of his parish, Phillips sat in bomb shelters and translated Paul's letter about the surplus of God's love for humanity. Phillips wrote later that he saw the parallels between the suffering Paul wrote about and the suffering England experienced during the war, and he felt like the good news of the gospel was meant especially for those times. We live in times of suffering, too. Around the world there is an abundance of war and death, of poverty, of hatred and incivility, of ignorance, of hopelessness... there is an abundance of suffering. The gospel (the good news of God's surplus love for us in Jesus Christ) was meant for *our* times. And we, like J.B. Phillips, are meant to deliver the good news. We are meant to be lovers of humanity. We are meant to express to all the world (even those we deem unworthy or unfit to receive it) that there is more than enough of God's love to go around. There is a surplus of God's love for humanity... for all creation.

Our church mission statement is (look on the front page of the bulletin) "Experiencing and Expressing Christ's love!" We come to this table, this morning, to experience Christ's love. Here we remember and celebrate that God, out of love for us came to be one of us: a fragile, vulnerable, human being, and He lived among us. Jesus taught us in stories and riddles about God's love. And when we found that we couldn't

stop Him or silence Him from talking about the surplus of God's love... for anyone and everyone... we had Him put to death on a cross. And even that didn't stop Him because from the cross He forgave us and continued to love us. And God, showing both love and humor, refused to let death and hatred have the last word, and so God raised Jesus from death.

We come to the Lord's Table to remember that out of God's abundant love for us, Jesus gave His body and His blood, to redeem us, to set us free from sin, and all the powers of hell, in order that we would experience God's love and be made new and whole by it. This is, of course, a lifelong process, being made new and whole by God's love. This is a good place to start, to experience the surplus of God's love for you. Last Sunday evening the Confirmation class made Communion bread and it smelled and tasted so wonderful. I told the Confirmands to take "big pieces" of Jesus because there is more than enough to go around. This morning as you take a piece of bread, representing Christ's body given for you, imagine that there is more than enough to go around. Imagine that you are surrounded and upheld and filled with God's love... so much that you can't keep it to yourself and you've got to express it, to share it, to give it away.

Today's Communion liturgy was written playfully and lovingly by a clergywoman, in the style of Dr. Seuss. Please follow and respond to the word printed in bold.

Right and Good-ful; Holy and Wonderful: A Dr. Seuss Communion Liturgy

In celebration of the children among us, our liturgy was written in the spirit of Dr. Seuss by Rev. Allie Scott of United Methodist regional ministry in East-Central Wisconsin. Please respond with the words in bold print.

May the Lord be with you.
And also with you.

May your hearts be lightened and filled with God's love!

We lift up our hearts and praise God above.

Let us give thanks to the Lord, God our Father.

We thank God and praise God – it isn't a bother!

It is right and good-ful; holy and wonderful;

blessed and joyful;

to give thanks to You God, Almighty and faithful.

For it's You that has given us this worship time,
filled with laughter, some holy humor, and rhyme.

It's You that has shown us Your holy love,

that You have sent from heaven high up above.

And so, with Your angels who first sang Your song,

we proclaim Your goodness by singing along:

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,

Heaven is filled with Your marvelous glory;

Earth is filled with Your light.

Blessed is he who comes in Your name –

“Hosanna on high!” we loudly proclaim.

Holy God, it's Your Son we remember today,

Jesus Christ, the anointed, whom we try to obey.

He encouraged the poor and freed the oppressed,

and taught us that You care about the distressed.

Through His suffering, death, and resurrection,

He taught that Your grace beats out our imperfection.

He ascended to Heaven and sits there beside You,

but still remains with us in all that we do.

On the night He was taken,

He lifted some bread,

He blessed it, and broke it, and here's what He said:

“Dear friends, this is My body to you that I give.

Take it; share it: in you I will live.

From now on, whenever, wherever you meet
remember our time when this bread here you eat.”

When supper was over, He then took the cup.

With praise and thanksgiving He lifted it up:

“For the New Covenant, this is My blood;

a sign of the Lord's continuing love.

For God has forgiven your every mistake,

so trust in God's love when this drink you partake.”

May we offer ourselves for God's greater glory,

and proclaim what we know of this fabulous story:

Christ Jesus: He died, but then rose again!

He'll return here on earth: Hallelujah! Amen!

Holy Spirit, come down on us gathered here,
with this bread and this fruit of the vine please appear.
Make holy this food, fill us with Your grace,
so we proclaim gospel to the whole human race.
We love You, Lord Jesus,
we'll shout out again Your glory and honor:
Amen and Amen!