



THE ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Light of the Valley Lutheran Church

Nothing Can Separate Us from the Love of Christ

Romans 8:35-39 (NIV84)

³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶ As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I love my family. (Big surprise, right?) I love my family for who they are and what they mean to me. One of the things that I love so much is my boys now being able to articulate and express that they love me too, particularly my youngest. It's been in the last couple of months that whenever I see him, he gives me a great big hug. What's even better is that he announces to me while he's hugging me, "I'm hugging you!...I love you, Daddy!" Even sometimes when I'm not looking, doing something else around the house, I will hear his little footfalls as he comes and wraps his arms around my legs and announces, "I'm hugging you!"

What if I just walked away from him as he was trying so hard to hug me? Could you imagine if I would tell my son, "No, I don't want your hugs. I don't want your love."? What kind of parent would I be if I separate my love from my children? What a horrible thought. No, we reciprocate the love.

People are emotional beings. For the most part, we crave physical contact. We want hugs. We want the reassurance and the affirmation that "Yes, you really do love me." It's when we don't hear those words or feel their tender embrace that we feel separated from their love.

If we need this from people on an everyday basis, it should be no surprise that we need this from God as well. But, it's a different interaction and a different contact that we have with God. He's always with us, yet we can never touch him. We read that he loves us, but we never actually hear a voice from heaven declaring that truth.

That lack of contact with God made the Christians in Rome feel as if they were separated from God's love. They didn't necessarily blame God for feeling distant from his love, but so many things had wedged their way between them. They had experienced trouble. They were pressured from the society they lived in to give up on their faith in God as they watched the heathens and the pagans – the unbelievers – prosper around them. As the pressures continued, they felt as if they were being cornered, hemmed in, as unbelievers mocked their faith, called them weird, wouldn't socialize with them. As the stress mounted, they didn't know what to do. Then the persecution escalated. No longer was it just a matter of ignoring you and not socializing with you, but now they were pursued because they were Christians. The persecutors sought to harm them physically as well as psychologically. The Christians had no choice but to flee, to retreat.

When they fled, they would often find themselves hungry as they were separated from their pantries, their food. As their clothes began to fall apart, they realized that they were separated from their wardrobes. While they were on the run, they knew that their persecutors had separated them from the safety and security of their community and instead surrounded them with danger. Sometimes their life was separated from them by the sword – as they were put to death, even by the government.

Paul knew that some of the Christians in Rome felt separated from the love of Christ. He knew that enemies were taunting their faith, pointing to their plight as proof that God did not love them, that God had distanced himself from them. Paul knew these same feelings of separation. The question was being asked and it needed to be answered, "Where is the love of God?"

Do you ever feel separated from the love of Christ? Maybe I should ask that differently: Do you ever feel like God's love is very far from you? We are emotional creatures. We crave a compassionate human touch. We want to hear the voice and see the person who says, "I love you." That's why when prayers seem to go unanswered, when bad thing after bad thing happens to you, when it seems like there is no one around who understands what you are going through and no one who simply listens to you to understand your problems, when your church family isn't there to support you and make you feel loved and let you know that this is a safe haven for sinners, that's when you feel separated from the love of Christ.

It makes sense that we would feel separated from God and his love in these instances. Why do you think long distance relationships are so hard? It's because you can't see the person, you can't see their demeanor, the nonverbal cues, all of these things which go to reassure you that they really do love you. This goes for the married couple where a spouse travels for work, for the kids who don't get to see Mom or Dad, for the boyfriend and girlfriend who are separated by hundreds of miles. Long distance relationships can make us feel separated.

Especially in those circumstances, as you feel like you are in a long distance relationship with God, he gives us this truth: Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Those Christians in Rome felt like they were sheep being led to the slaughterhouse, not sheep being led by the Good Shepherd to quiet waters and green pastures. They felt as if they were made to suffer because that was their reality. They felt separated from the love of Christ.

It is to these Christians that Paul writes, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." (verse 37) You are not being defeated, falling victim to the world because you are holding on to your faith in Christ as your Savior from sin. You are more than conquerors. You are "super-conquerors." You are not defeated by the feelings of separation. Instead, you have defeated all these things. You stand victorious because Christ is victorious. That is what the empty tomb on Easter means. It truly is finished; the victory is won. Jesus' rising from the dead proved that he had conquered death for us and so conquered any naysayers regarding this love for us.

We are even more assured of that victory because of what we heard last week in the verses preceding this section. God told us that he is working all things for our good, for our salvation. He predestined us to be conformed to the perfect image of his Son. And he is carrying out that decision by having called us by this message of Jesus Christ's victory for us to believe that he has won the whole battle for us. Since God has called us to faith in him, we are declared not guilty as he clothes us with the perfection of Christ. And he will glorify us, bring us to our heavenly home because no one can thwart God; he is the victor.

That's why Paul goes on to say and invites us to say with him, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (verses 38-39) Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. Nothing can overpower God. Nothing can rip us from faith in him because we are God's chosen, because he has called us to faith, because he has justified us – declared us not guilty of our sins.

It is true. Death, judgment cannot separate us from God's love because we already know his ruling about us – not guilty, forgiven, loved. Nothing in life can tear us away from God, nothing that these persecutors of Christians can do can take away what God has done for us and the fact that he loves every day. Neither angels nor demons – no supernatural force can pull us out of the hand of Jesus. They cannot overpower him; they have to submit to him. Same with the other rulers and authorities and powers of this earth. They may look impressive and bigger than life, but they are not bigger than our God. Neither the present nor the future - no dimension of time can affect God's love for us. It will not grow cold the longer it exists, and it is not absent in our current day and age. Neither height nor depth –no dimension of space can take you away from God's love. You can go as far as the east is from the west, you can go to the outer reaches of space, and God's love will still stand right there beside you. Nor anything else in all creation can separate you from the love of God. There are no loopholes. There is nothing that has been missed, nothing that can actually counter God's love for us and pull us away from him. That is how secure our salvation is in Christ. Not a single thing in this world – visible or invisible, powerful or weak – has the possibility of separating us from the love of God.

When you feel distant from God, separated from his love, you tell Satan this truth: Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. You may not be able to necessarily feel it or see it, but Jesus loves you even more than what my two-year-old shows me with his hugs. God's Word wants you to have that picture of him with outstretched arms with the nail marks in his hands showing, "This is how much I love you, and I will never take that from you."

Since we can't touch God this side of heaven or necessarily hear God's own voice, God has tasked us to show his love to each other. We bring people God's love when we are willing to listen to a person's struggles and give them the sound advice that nothing can separate them from God's love, that he works all things for the good of those he loves – and he loves you! We speak with God's voice and his authority as we tell others about the conquering victory that Jesus Christ has secured for us. We are the ones who show this world and each other that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord simply in how we treat one another. Nothing can separate you from God's love. So, brothers and sisters in Christ, be that love in this world. Bring that inseparable love to others. Amen.