**Romans 8:35-39** August 16, 2020

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 *Romans 8:35Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? 36As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” 37No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39neither 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.*

**Picture This: “Nothing Can separate us from the love of God”**

Dear Friends in Christ,

 This past week I was in a store that had a lot of Christian themed home decorations. There were beautiful pictures with inspirational Bible passages. And there were little knick-knacks that you might put in a couple strategic spots to give your home a Christian feel. Beautiful things, beautiful pictures, beautiful Bible passages; beautiful reminders of God’s goodness to us. It’s all good.

 If I had been thinking ahead, I would have looked for a picture with today’s reading: ***“Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God.”*** I am sure I would have found it if only I had looked. This is one of that handful—that couple dozen—of most beloved and to-the-point Scriptures that finds its way onto pictures and coffee mugs. It is powerful enough to be meaningful; short enough to stick in the memory (and to fit in the limited print area.) ***“Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God”*** But I forgot. I forgot to look for it. So, later in the week, I started to use my imagination to try and find a picture of my own imagination that fit this passage? “What’s a good picture? Hmmm.” The 21st century being what it is, instead of doing the hard work of sitting and thinking and imagining a great picture, I quickly realized it would be a lot easier to google images for this Bible passage. Instantly I had dozens of images for Romans 8:39. Most common were pictures of beautiful sunrises or sunsets. There were beautiful pictures of snowclad mountains, and a few other odds and ends.

 Good pictures. Appropriate pictures. But here is what happens when we reduce big Bible truths to a single sentence painted onto a picture chosen by someone else. We stop thinking. We don’t do the work. Like me going to google, instead of doing the work of imagining a picture, when we see that passage on a picture, we stop asking what this Bible passage means in my life. We let the picture do the work for us. We get this visual dopamine rush and stop thinking because we already have our little brain chemical reward.

 To be clear, I am not criticizing any of those pictures. They are good. They come from a good intention and can be wonderful reminders of God’s goodness in our homes. But I am saying that how the Bible applies to me and my life is far more complex than a single stock photo taken under ideal circumstances and then digitally manipulated by somebody who has at least a small financial incentive to prioritize curb appeal over actual meaning.

 When I look at those sunrise and mountain photos and compare them to my life, there is a problem. My life doesn’t look like a picture perfect sunrise photo. I do have much to be thankful for—let me be clear on that, too! But I have to daily confess the sins I have committed, sins of thought, word and deed. I end up having to ask God to accomplish his will through my work, in spite of my weaknesses and failings. Reading, hearing, watching online content I come across comments that dismiss and insult me for my Christian faith, and sometimes it rattles me. I am concerned for my family, my friends and you, my fellow Christians for a variety of heavenly and earthly reasons. I worry about people who are straying and people who just don’t seem to care. We all look at our society that is in flux and we worry what the new realities will be once we finally get back to life’s routines. Few are the days that resemble a beautiful sunrise, start to finish. Sometimes it even happens that we can’t wait for the sun to set on our cloudy day.

 An unclouded day didn’t match the Apostle Paul’s life either. When Paul asked ***“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?”*** he wasn’t standing on the shores of a serene mist-covered mountain lake. In the next verse he describes his own life saying, ***“As it is written: ‘For your sake [O God] we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’”*** Paul had faced death, often. He had been beaten bloody, stoned, shipwrecked and much more. He felt like he was an inch from death every moment. He knew what most people thought of his faith in Christ Jesus. He knew that many would rather have him dead than alive, they considered him a sheep to be slaughtered.

 When Paul wrote, ***“For your sake [O God] we face death all day long…”*** He prefaced it by saying, ***“As it is written”*** That’s significant. This wasn’t his idea. It was someone else’s. He was quoting from the Old Testament book of Psalms. ***“We face death all day long”*** was written more than a thousand years before Christ. The point is that Paul knew he was not experiencing something unusual or unique. Nor are your worst experiences. It has always been the lot of godly Christians to feel pressure because of, and in the exercise of their faith. Some feel fierce opposition to their faith. (In many countries of the world, it is not individuals but the government that persecutes them with loss of property and imprisonment. Others have not faced outright opposition, but know the daily spiritual battles we fight. It is a battle with our sinful nature, with the forces around us that tempt us to sin, or to distract us into forgetting God. It is a battle with Satan who knows our weaknesses and puts strategically placed tripping stones in our path. We get worn down like athletes in the fourth quarter. We ache from the spiritual battles.

 In the midst of these pressures, every thoughtful Christian is humbly aware of the danger of falling from the faith. We remember the first king of Israel, Saul. God chose him to be king and religious leader of his own people, but Saul abandoned his faith. The Bible book of First Samuel is a tragedy outlining how Israel’s first king, year by year, wandered farther and farther from God and ended in disaster. We remember Judas who was chosen as one of Christ’s inner circle. He walked, talked and ate with Jesus, but in the end traded Jesus (and his own eternal life) for a bag of money! If such things have happened to others in such privileged positions—God’s king, Jesus’ disciple—each Christian knows that we must not become smug. We remember not only Bible stories but also Bible passages like 1 Corinthians 10:12, *“So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!”*

 The Apostle Paul mixes all of these thoughts into his conviction that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. It isn’t necessarily a pretty picture. So what kind of picture would the Apostle Paul have painted?

 Maybe a wearied and bandaged warrior? Or a dusty, exhausted farmer in the heat, looking to the heavens for rain. Now a mother, exhausted, face in her hands, wondering how many more sleepless nights she can survive caring for a sick child, pleading with God for strength and healing. Those pictures are closer to what God’s word is here saying, ***“In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 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.”*** And now, in those pictures of people in hopeless circumstances, the love of Christ slices through the clouds. A beam of sunlight shines only that Christian, that warrior, that farmer, that mother. The love of Christ rests on them, defying death and life, angels and demons, the present and the future, height and depth, all that life can throw at us. That sunlight is the assurance that Christ Jesus forgave us, that faith in Him has been planted in the our heart by the Holy Spirit, that God the Father promises to uphold the faith we have through the length of our days.

 The victory is ours. It was not won by us, but it is our victory. Three times in our reading we hear a phrase. Three times this reading mentions ***“the love of Christ”*** or ***“the love of God.”*** Each time God’s love is the powerful enduring thing. It is not our love, our works, our perseverance that win the victory. God’s love in Christ Jesus is what conquers and beats our enemies into submission so that they lie broken around us. God’s love is what gives us the victory. God’s love is not a permissive, lazy approval of whatever is is. That’s what the world thinks of when it says, “God is love.” God’s love is a powerful force that destroyed our enemies, and that continues to carry us on to our final victory.

 When I was looking online for images that matched this verse, there was one that seemed to do a better job capturing this verse. It was a black-and-white photo of a great big daddy hand holding a chubby little baby hand. I could hear my wife saying, “That is so cute!” That’s a picture I like for this verse. This verse, ***“Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus”*** isn’t about the beauty of nature—a sunrise or mountain peak. It is about the ugliest things in this world and it is about strength and commitment that holds us tight through all that ugliness. It is about one who is strong and one who is weak—and I know which one is God and which one is me. His strength will carry me through the ugliest things that this world can dish out, to a place of beauty that far surpasses the most ideal picture, better than the most pleasant place you have ever set your foot, beyond this created order in its best moments. ***“Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*** Amen.