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“What Can Separate Us”

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Romans 8:26-39 (NRSV)
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In the midst of tribulation, stand by me;
In the midst of tribulation, stand by me.
When the hosts of hell assail,
And my strength begins to fail,
Thou Who never lost a battle, Stand by me.

I’m really tired of the COVID life. Anyone else feeling that way?

The number of COVID-19 cases in Ohio continues to rise. We are now under a state-wide public mask order. There will be no large gatherings any time soon, with or without masks. Uncertainty swirls around the start of the school year, whether it is safe for anyone to return to in-person instruction and skepticism abounds regarding the efficacy of virtual learning. Though the percentage of fatalities from COVID-19 is relatively small, that is little consolation to the thousands of families who have lost loved ones, whose lives are forever altered because of this virus. The economic impact of the pandemic is mixed, depending on one’s vocation. The burden is unequal, taking a larger toll on small businesses, blue collar workers, and the poor.

Restrictions related to COVID-19 further complicate the challenges we face as a society: racial injustice that has been left unacknowledged and unaddressed for far too long; losing civil rights giants John Lewis and C. T. Vivian in the same week; corruption and bribery among public officials leading to devastating consequences for taxpayers and the environment; political turmoil that seems to get worse every day; secret police abducting people from the streets in unmarked cars; international intrigue and espionage; leaders who point fingers and assign blame to deflect responsibility. Is it any wonder that depression and anxiety are off the charts? Each issue is like a wedge widening the gap between people, between groups of people, between all of us and the hope for a brighter tomorrow.

The isolation of pandemic makes all this only that much harder, because we can’t be together or embrace one another or look one another in the eye to offer encouragement and solidarity. Without the assurance and support of friends and loved ones, we can be left spinning out of control – frustrated, angry, and generally exhausted.

Where is God in all this? We are suffering. We need help!

Now, to some, it might seem hyperbolic to speak of what we are experiencing as *suffering*. Maybe the pandemic hasn’t had that much adverse personal effect on you, aside from the inconvenience of having to wear a mask and decide which pair of sweatpants to wear tomorrow. Maybe Black Lives Matter is a movement you have the luxury of choosing whether or not to follow. Maybe you’re able to observe everything happening in the world with a kind of ambivalent wistfulness, a sense of disconnection, a perception that nothing you do will really change things. Or maybe you’ve been devastated by the news or by loss or by just facing daily realities so often that you’ve grown numb, building up emotional defenses to dull the pain. I choose the word “suffering” not to be overly dramatic or to diminish the suffering experienced by others, but because what I am seeing as a pastor and faith leader is wreaking havoc on mental and spiritual health, connections to those around us, and engagement with the world. Viktor Frankl described despair as suffering without meaning (D=S-M). A holocaust survivor and psychologist, Frankl observed that those who could not find meaning or purpose in the midst of their suffering were prone to despair. Those who gave in to despair who lost a sense of meaning – were least likely to survive their ordeal.¹ We all pray we’ll come through this intact.

¹ <https://bolstablog.wordpress.com/2012/02/27/viktor-frankl/>

Suffering was on Paul's mind when he wrote the 8th chapter of his great Letter to the Romans. He quoted from Psalm 44, a psalm that asks where God is when we suffer, even going so far as to blame God for calamity: "Because of you we are being killed all day long and accounted as sheep for the slaughter." Paul understood pain and suffering. He had been beaten, imprisoned, afflicted with a "thorn in the flesh," shipwrecked, bitten by a poisonous snake, tormented by enemies, ridiculed and rejected, and challenged at every turn. Even now, when writing this letter, he knew that his opponents had reached Rome before him, jeopardizing his plans to travel there and then on to Spain to carry the Gospel to the end of the known world. And he must have had some sense of the challenges ahead for the faithful, preparing them for the worst while encouraging them to keep the faith.

Paul's eye was on the eschatological promise, the fulfillment of God's cosmic plan and the ushering in of God's reign. A few verses earlier, he wrote, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us." Paul saw hope in the world to come, describing all of creation as "groaning in labor pains until now" awaiting the coming kingdom. But Paul also saw reason for hope in the present. God's kingdom is not of this world, and yet we see signs of God's inbreaking presence now. Paul says, in essence: *Look at what God has already done! God knew us, called us, adopted us, forgave us, and elevated us to be God's agents of reconciliation and hope. This isn't cause for fear. It's cause for celebration!*

Then he goes on to make a bold proclamation, one that has brought hope and encouragement to generations of Christ-followers: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." We don't *wonder* if all things work together for good. *We know it*, Paul says. *It's a given*. Now, does that mean that only good things will happen to people who love God? *No*. Does it mean that God uses pain and suffering to bring about good things to those God chooses? *I don't think so*. Rather, it is a declaration that God *can* bring good out of *any* circumstance, at least for those who have the vision to see it and the faith to be part of God's work in this world.

The political rhetoric that bombards us, the polarization of racial inequities, the isolation that comes from pandemic, the arguments about how to respond to a public health emergency coupled with economic uncertainty are all things that separate us from one another and threaten to separate us from God. The noise of our outrage and frustration keeps us from hearing God's voice. There are many reasons we are in the situation we are in today, but ultimately it boils down to *sin*. Sin is whatever separates us from God. And there is plenty of it to be found in our world right now. But while we often think of *personal* sin and its impact on us as individuals, *societal* or *corporate* sin can be even more devastating to our life together: The arrogance and posturing of political leaders is a consequence of our public insistence that leaders be faultless, certain, and uncompromising. We have flattened the narrative about race by pretending there can be peace without justice, forgiveness without acknowledgement, reconciliation without honesty about our past and present failures. We unquestioningly pour money into law enforcement and security without doing the work to understand the causes behind threats to public safety or providing the training and specialized help needed to address those ills. Politics offer damage control and political spin when a swift, science-based, data-driven response to COVID-19 was needed to protect people. We have more collective sins than we can name, both the products of and contributors to the sin in our own hearts.

But there is good news. Christ came not just to love and teach and heal, but to defeat the power of sin. Beginning in verse 31, Paul stages a courtroom drama in which we are the defendants against the powers of this world. Paul takes the role of defense attorney:

If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

God came to us in Christ, not to condemn *us*, but to condemn *sin*. And not just the personal stuff, either, but the structures and systems that perpetuate injustice and oppression, that trap people in hopelessness and despair. The brokenness of our world is not inevitable and it is not insurmountable. A pandemic can't defeat us. No political power or outcome can break us. There is no loss or fear or diagnosis or shutdown or social construct that can separate us from Christ's love. There is always hope. Christ is God's *yes* to the world's *no*.

So, what does all this mean? Our faith gives us not only hope, but victory. And if our ultimate victory is in Christ, we have *already* conquered sin *and* its consequences. But Paul tells us that we are *more than conquerors*, because God is always with us, active within each one of us and in our relationships and even in the midst of the fallenness of this world, giving us the assurance and the strength to continue our mission of love and grace in the face of *any* hardship. *Any* hardship. In fact, hardship is the first on the list of the things Paul names that seem to threaten to separate us from the love of Christ. We overlook it, focusing on the more dramatic words like famine, nakedness, peril, or sword (all of which Paul knew personally, by the way). But for most of us, hardship is the most common enemy. *Life is hard*. It can be exhausting. And right now, it seems harder than ever just to keep going and move forward into an uncertain future. But can it separate us from God? Paul's answer is an emphatic *No*:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, 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.

No earthly ruler – no mayor or judge, no autocrat or president – can separate us from God's love. Nothing in our present circumstances – virus, income loss, learning environment, ideological polarization, racism, sexism, or any other -ism that regards some people as "less than" – can separate us from God's love. Nothing in the future, far off or near, personal or collective, uncertain as it may be, can separate us from God's love. No power – earthly or cosmic, can separate us from God's love. No high or low – physical or emotional – can separate us from God's love. No pain or loss, not even death itself, can separate us from God's love. *That is God's promise to us*, a promise fulfilled in Christ and sustained by the Holy Spirit. We do not live without hope. Fear cannot stop love. God is with us. We are *never* alone.

What good will God bring out of this moment we are in? Will we learn to be more patient instead of being obsessed with instant gratification? Will we slow down and make time for better balance in our lives? Will we invest more in relationships that make us healthy and whole? Will we be more intentional about setting aside time for prayer and cultivating our connection to God? One thing is for certain – God can do far more than we can even begin to imagine, for those with the vision to see it and the faith to live into it.

What feelings are you experiencing more intensely these days? Anxiety? Sadness? Frustration? Anger? Resentment? Helplessness? When those feelings come, acknowledge them, recognize their legitimacy, but don't fixate on them. Affect the things you can affect and let go of the things you cannot. We are impacted by the things happening around us, but we are not defined by them. Center yourself in God's grace, know that you are loved, and look for signs of God's movement in the world and presence in your life. Because if there is one thing in this life that we can count on, it is that *God's love never fails*.

We do not know what tomorrow will bring. But we do know that God can bring good out of even this. Keep alert for the good that God is working in you, through you, to bring hope to a suffering world. And trust in God's promise that nothing – NOTHING – will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.