**Nothing Can Separate Us** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time The House of Hope Presbyterian Church Psalm 119: 129-136; Roman 8:26-39Saint Paul, Minnesota

July 30, 2023

A few years ago, Garrison Keillor published a book titled: *The Lake Wobegon Virus.* Chapter 1 has a story about one of my favorite Lake Wobegon characters, *Pastor Liz.*

(On) Sunday morning, (Pastor Liz) seemed distracted, she didn’t join in the opening hymn, she stood up to give the sermon. The rule about sermons is: *they should have a clear beginning and a strong end, and the two should be as close together as possible.* Liz is dyslexic, so she tries to memorize the sermon, but she carries blank paper with her because Lutherans get nervous if the pastor in the pulpit has no text, they worry that she’ll go on at length and the pot roast will burn in the oven.

This sermon got away from her, and it went on for almost an hour. It started out on the verse in Colossians about Christ interceding for us at the right hand of the throne of God, and the word *“throne”* flipped a switch, and she told about the time she flew to Boston and used the toilet on the plane, not noticing the warning sign *“DO NOT FLUSH WHILE SEATED ON TOILET,”* because she was sitting on the toilet at the time, and she flushed and felt a powerful force gripping her butt like a python seizing a rat, and she couldn’t pry herself loose.

The flight attendant was tapping on the door and asking, *“Are you all right?”* and Pastor Liz didn’t know how to answer that question. She was basically all right in that she had faith in God’s unceasing love, but on the other hand, she was being swallowed by a toilet.

The flight attendant tried to break the seal by inserting his hand between the toilet seat and her left cheek. But she was still stuck, and the plane had to make an emergency landing in Cleveland, and the ground crew cut the toilet free with an acetylene torch and lifted her out, the seat still stuck to her, and carried her through the terminal, toilet seat attached, and someone took a picture, and it appeared on Instagram, Liz looking like a Parker House roll on a plate, with arms and legs.

This picture made its way to the bishop, and so Liz, who’d been marked for a coveted assignment at prestigious Central Lutheran in Minneapolis, got shunted off to Lake Wobegon. Minneapolis Lutherans didn’t want a pastor whose buttocks had gone viral online. One wrong flush, and though she’d been valedictorian at St. Olaf, she was sent to the sticks.[[1]](#footnote-1)

My favorite line in this story is: *“she was basically all right in that she had faith in God’s unceasing love, but on the other hand, she was being swallowed by a toilet.*” Very Minnesota! However, it’s one thing to suffer the indignity of embarrassment and shame; it’s quite another to experience separation and abandonment from God.

And that is what Paul is addressing in today’s text from Romans 8.

You see, the well-known phrase promising us that *nothing* can separate us from the love of God *assures* those whose lives and faith are under *duress* that God’s presence and love are with us always.

But can we really believe this? Is this kind of faith naïve and unrealistic at best?

Ryan Dueck, who is quoted on the front of the bulletin this morning, has some wise words about this.

He said, “so much of life is a gradual (or painfully, wrenchingly abrupt) process of being separated from things. We are separated from the *past*, from experiences and relationships that form us as people. As time marches on, the memories fade or become cloudy, and we feel them slipping away … We are, in many ways, products of our pasts, yet the past is always slipping away.

We are separated from the *future.* We don’t know what it will hold, don’t know how we will respond to the things it will contain. How will we cope with the difficulties that loom on the horizon? Will we be strong enough? Will we be the people that we want to be, the people that those around us need us to be? We see life take its toll on our friends, our families, our neighbors. We know that we are powerless to secure the things that matter most to us. We want to believe in a hopeful future, but we look around and it seems far from certain. We wonder if faith and hope will be strong and sure enough for what looms on the horizon.

We are increasingly separated from our *bodies* and our *competencies.* To grow older is to lose the ability to do things that we once did, or to do them differently than we once did. We know that our bodies will one day betray us, that our minds will one day not be as sharp as we are pleased to imagine they are now. We know that our motivations and inclinations will morph and grow and decline and fade. We know that nothing stays the same and that while there are undoubtedly gains as things change, there are also significant losses.

We are separated from those *we love.* All of us know or will know what it means to have those close to us die. This is the final separation, the one that often hurts the very most. But there are smaller deaths, smaller separations along the way. Relationships die or wither away into small and selfish shells of what they once were. Illness and chronic pain steal the people we love away from us, replacing them with people we barely recognize, people we struggle to love.

And, of course, there is the threat of separation produced by the *suffering and pain* of those we dearly love—a separation that threatens to finally break us. We have our well-rehearsed words about the meaning of pain, of how God is present in the pain, about how God will redeem the pain, etc. And then suffering actually comes—it leaps from the sterile pages of books and articles and takes up residence in our lives. And we stagger and groan, groping around in the dark, searching for the God, clinging to hopes that seemed so sure in the light, but that now seem impotent and distant in the midst of dark valleys.

Yes, to be human is to live in the shadows of separation from the best and the deepest parts of who we are, who and how we love, and for what we ultimately hope. The things we most want fly by the window as the train speeds by. Nothing sticks, nothing lasts. Everything fades away, including us.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

And yet, the powerful hope of Romans 8 is that even in the midst of all these separations, there is nothing that can finally separate us from the love of God. Nothing. Not one of the separations whose dark clouds we daily live under can pose a final threat to the love of God, in Christ Jesus our Lord. There is a thread that weaves its way through all of our losses, all of our separations, and the thread looks like love. This is a truly astounding hope!

Libby Howe speaks of it this way:

“After my mom’s untimely death in 2005, my faith changed dramatically. I wasn’t the only one who noticed. After being back in the pulpit a few months after she died, a parishioner said to me on her way out of worship, *“Your preaching has always been good, and I’ve never doubted your sincerity. But now it feels like you really*mean*it. And you really believe it for yourself. I hope it’s okay that I say this”*—she was from a Pentecostal background among Norwegian Lutherans*—“but it sounds to me like a testimony . . . and I love it!”*

She could hear (said Howe) that I was truly convinced of my own words in a way that had never quite been there before. I affirmed that what she could see was also what I could feel. Beliefs that dwelled in my intellect had found their way into my whole self: body, mind, being, spirit, soul, strength.

Preaching wasn’t just a bunch of nice ideas anymore to talk about using pretty words that may enlighten, impress, or comfort. No, I was telling the truth as I had come to know and experience it: the truth of God’s presence in the pits of death and grief. The truth of God’s provision through the community of the faithful. The truth of God’s power to give me breath when I couldn’t breathe and move my feet when I couldn’t walk. The truth of God’s promise that the end of my mother’s life on this earth was not the end of our life together.

Before she died, I spoke of God’s presence, provision, power, and promises. I even believed what I said. But after she died, I spoke of it as a *witness*—one who had seen it with my own eyes, felt it with my own body, and knew it as truth I couldn’t help myself from sharing. I didn’t *believe.* I was *convinced.*”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Hear the testimony of Paul in Romans once more:

*“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 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!”* (Romans 8:37-39).

Friends, it can sound really trite (pollyannish) to say that *love* is bigger than all that life threatens to steal. *But what if it were true? What if it were*really true*that the final word upon all of our stories, with all their separations, was the most powerful and determined love imaginable?* *What if* it *were true* that nothing—nothing!—can separate us from the love of all loves, the light of all lights, the One who gave himself away, binding himself to us and us to him, and ensuring that the final word for those whose hope is in this One is not separation *but unity and embrace?*

If it were true—and if those of us who live with this conviction and hope internalized this into the very core of our beings—then we might just be *“more than conquerors”* (Rom. 8:37). Not because we are particularly strong or stoic, not because separations don’t hurt terribly, not because doubts don’t arise, and certainly not because our beliefs allow us to skate cheerily across the surface of pain, but because—and onlybecause—the one who loved us has already conquered, and because he holds out his wounded hands to welcome us, to guide us, to prop us up when failing, and to carry us, if necessary, into the future he has prepared.[[4]](#footnote-4)

*Let us pray--*

1. Garrison Keillor, The Lake Wobegon Virus, published on September 8, 2020, [Arcade Publishing.](https://www.skyhorsepublishing.com/9781951627676/the-lake-wobegon-virus/) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ryan Dueck, *Nothing Can Separate,* The Christian Century, April 29, 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Libby Howe, *Convinced: Romans 8:26-39,* The Christian Century, July 28, 2023 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ryan Dueck, *Nothing Can Separate,* The Christian Century, April 29, 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)