

Pentecost 8A (7/30/17)
1 Kings 3:5-12
Psalm 119:129-136
Romans 8:26-39
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

We are acutely aware of all kinds of separation. But there is no alienation so complete that God cannot reach us. Rather, God overcomes our separation, binding God's own self to us in love as securely as a nail binds flesh to wood. And in this way, God also binds us to one another in sacrificial love.

Did you notice that the Apostle Paul entertains the idea of predestination in our second reading from Romans? He suggests that God chose us as kindred in Christ even before we came into being:

For those whom [God] foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that [the Son] might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Since God is not bound by time, then God must have ordained our lives of faith long before we could even contemplate what faith means.

The notion that God has fixed our destiny is controversial, painting God as a grand puppeteer, and free will as an illusion. But, to borrow the words of one interpreter, "For Paul predestination equips believers with the confidence to confront the personal and corporate challenges of existence."¹ In other words, predestination is less like a prison and more like a promise, a light in the shadow of our uncertainty.

¹ Richard I. Pervo, <http://members.newproclamation.com/commentary.php?d8m=7&d8d=27&d8y=2014>.

And Paul spells out this promise with verses so unforgettable that Luther believed they ought to be written in golden letters²:

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.

Preserved at the heart of Paul's letter to the Romans like a pearl of great value, **this passage is a striking confession of faith, an expression of Christian hope that endures in spite of all that threatens to undermine it.**

When I think of my child, I can't ignore the vulnerability inherent in our created existence. Becoming a parent has made me aware that we all live one moment to the next on the verge of pain and loss. One sunny evening earlier this month, Alex was happily petting a dog outside Elements Frozen Yogurt when she suddenly turned her attention to the park across the street and darted out into busy Meridian Avenue. In the blink of an eye, she might have been separated from us forever.

And, thank God she wasn't. But a near miss like that only serves to remind us that separation is inevitable.³ **In spite of our innate yearning for connection and wholeness, we are confronted with the power of separation throughout our lives.** Separation from our mother's womb exposes us to the trauma of bodily life. Separation from our childhood

² Deirdre J. Good, http://members.newproclamation.com/commentary.php?d8m=7&d8d=27&d8y=2014&event_id=55&cycle=A&atom_id=25098.

³ See David M. Greenhaw, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 3, 280.

innocence lays bare the world's profound brokenness and our own stubborn complicity. Separation from our family of origin gives us a taste of independence, but also presents the possibility of loneliness. Separation from a lover or friend damages our ability to trust, sometimes beyond repair. Separation from our physical health isolates us in hospitals and bedrooms, robbing us of our way of life. Separation from a loved one who has died leaves a scar that will never fully heal. And finally, our own inescapable separation from this life brings us to the edge of the unknown, rousing our deep-seated fear of nothingness.

“Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” the Apostle Paul asks rhetorically, rattling off a list of painful realities: “Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” And, notwithstanding all the positive thinking that characterizes our culture, **who among us would not acknowledge that our lives can be wrenched apart at any time by financial misfortune, or family crisis, or unfavorable diagnosis, or natural disaster, or addiction, or freak accident, or violence?**

Like Paul, we are acutely aware of all kinds of separation. But, like Paul, we cling to the promise at the heart of our faith:

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.

There is no alienation so complete that God cannot reach us. Nothing – no tragedy, no broken relationship, no shame, no loneliness, no loss, no, not even the certainty of death – can cut us off from the love of God. God overcomes all our separation, binding God’s own self to us in love as securely as a nail binds flesh to wood. And, if God is willing to suffer the godforsakenness of the cross in order to share our circumstances, then where will God *not* go to meet us for the sake of love?

Dear church, even as we are reconciled to God, we are also reconciled to each other. The God of the cross also binds us to one another in sacrificial love, so that when we suffer, we do not suffer alone, but cling to one another as kindred in Jesus Christ, who is “the firstborn within a large family.”

So, when I think of Alex, I don’t entertain the illusion that I’ll be able to protect her from the pain of separation. I don’t pretend that she’ll always be safe and happy. But I do know that God loves her no matter what, and so do I. And, that’s what I tell her when I make the sign of the cross on her forehead every night before I leave her bedroom and close the door.