

March 5, 2006
Lent 1

"Who Shall Separate Us from the Love of Christ?"

ROMANS 8:31-39

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ³³ Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died-- more than that, who was raised to life-- is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. 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.

Do you remember the day you had to take your pet down to the vet's office for the last time? How hard it was to say goodbye to the animal that you loved and to be separated from your faithful companion and friend who never failed you. It is even more difficult to be near the bed of someone you love and know that they will not be with you much longer. There is a terrible knot in the stomach when you need to say goodbye to a son or daughter and see them leave for school or the military. Or what about the home that you lived in for many years? It was not easy to walk out the door and move.

In the Revelation, John saw heaven as a place where there will be "no more sea." He was an exile on the island of Patmos. The waves of the Mediterranean Sea separated him from the congregation he loved, the dear Christians in Ephesus. It is also hard for us as a congregation to say goodbye to people and see them move to other parts of the country.

The love Jesus has for you never changes. He is always the same, yesterday, today and forever. Some of the most comforting words in Scripture are found in the words we just read to you. Life may have its share of changes, ups and downs, and twists and turns. People leave us and blessings are taken away. The love of Jesus is always the same. Let's zoom in and listen to the question Paul asks us: **"Who Shall Separate Us from the Love of Christ?"**

1) Shall losses?

Life has its gains and life has its losses. Are there any losses we experience that could possibly in any way separate us from Christ's love? Paul asks the powerful question "What shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all- how will he not with him, graciously give us all things." Your bank account goes down. You suffer the loss of good health. You have

days when you feel like saying, "Nobody loves me. Everybody hates me. Guess I'll have to go and eat worms." The love you have in Christ never changes because God is for us. He did not spare his Son but gave him up graciously for us all.

When I was a kid we played softball during our school recesses. When it came time to picking teams, there was always one kid that was picked first. He was stronger and bigger than most of the kids and he could bat right or left handed. If you had him on your team, there was a good chance of winning.

Who is on your team? Who is on your side? It is the God who created the heavens and the earth. It is your loving heavenly Father who did not spare his Son but freely gave him up for us all just so you could always be at his side and even speak to him as children speak to their dads. Romans 5 says, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were sinners Christ died for us." God did not spare his Son. The Father gave him up for us all. This is the evidence, the supreme evidence, that the blessings you have in Jesus are huge. Any other losses in life are small by comparison. That is why Job was able to say after losing his family and his wealth, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord."

2) Shall judgment?

Could it be that condemnation or judgment could separate you from God's love? Not when you have Christ as your Savior. "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? It is Christ who died, more than that, who was raised to life-is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us." Can you think of anyone who might possibly drag up something from your past that might threaten you and tell you that you are not worthy of God's love? I can! Satan does this all the time. In the Revelation Satan is described as an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his head. Then it says of him, "He accuses them before our God day and night." Just as Satan attacked Jesus in the desert for forty days and nights, he viciously attacks the people Jesus loves. He causes sin and shame and guilt to loom up so large that they begin to think, "No one could ever forgive a worm like me."

Some day every human being will stand before God in the final judgment. We will have to give an answer for every single sinful act, every sinful thought and every failure to do good things. How clear are the words of Scripture: "We must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ." Also: "It is appointed unto man once to day and then comes the judgment." Satan is a master at creating doubt, even leading us to think we must contribute something to the process of making ourselves worthy.

The question is raised, "Who will bring anything against those who God has chosen?" The answer comes next. "It is God who justifies." Wow! Just think of what this is saying to us this morning. No one can bring charges against you because God himself has justified you, declared you not guilty. Think back to how upset we were about ten years ago when the court declared OJ Simpson not guilty for reasonable doubt. Because the court declared him not guilty, he could not be tried again for that crime. The Lord your God was able to get you off the hook and get you a verdict of not guilty. He did not use reasonable

doubt or twisting of the evidence. He paid the debt in your place, for you, by placing the guilt and the punishment you deserve on his Son. "The punishment for our guilt was upon him." The Father raised Jesus from the dead and with that he pronounced us "Not guilty!" That's the final word. To that we can say a loud "Amen."

And if there is any further doubt that someone can bring a charge against you, listen again to what Paul says about Jesus. "Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died-more than that, who was raised to life- is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for you." Need a good lawyer to represent you before God. You have the best. Jesus is sitting on the right hand of God the Father. He is pleading your case. He is interceding for you. Jesus is also your judge sitting at the side of his heavenly Father. If your judge and attorney are the same person, don't you think you have a good case going for you? Joyfully we can look forward to being judged by our God in this life and on the judgment day because we can say with Paul in Romans 8:1, "There is now therefore no condemnation to those who are in Christ."

3) Shall persecution?

What about persecution? Will persecution separate you from the love of Christ? "Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or sword? As it is written for your sake we face death all day long: we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." "Trouble" and "hardship" represent the thought of being squeezed into a narrow space. Then there is the word for persecution. It literally means to be pursued the way a pack of wolves might hunt an injured moose and drag it down. Some of the Christians in Rome who read this letter faced severe persecution for their faith. Some were wrapped in sheepskins and placed into the Coliseum and torn apart by wild beasts.

Christians facing severe persecution have lived from day to day sustained by the courage that comes from knowing no pit is so deep that Christ and his love are not always deeper.

During the time of the Spanish Inquisition they found the skeletal remains of Christian Huguenot chained to the wall of a deep dungeon. Scratched on the wall with a sharp nail or stone was a cross. On each side of the cross were the Spanish words "la anchura, la longitud, la profundidad y la altura." Translated they mean "How wide and long and high and deep" referring to the love of Christ and the well known words of Ephesians 3: "And I pray that you being rooted and established in love, may have power with all the saints to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge."

As we sing in "A Mighty Fortress is our God, "And do what they will -- Hate, steal, hurt, or kill -- Though all may be gone, Our victory is won; The kingdom's ours forever!"

4) Shall anything in all creation?

Now for a grand sweep of the whole universe. "No 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.”

The word for conqueror in Greek is “Nikao” from which we get the name of the goddess for victory, Nike from which we get the name for the famous sports equipment, Nike. What made Nike so successful? It was the famous swoosh designed by a college graphic arts student. It promotes the idea of being a conqueror and being successful at achieving your goals. That is what inspires people, lifts them up and makes life worth living. In these words we are assured that we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. The Revelation reminds us, “And we shall reign with Christ for a thousand years, in this life and for all eternity.

Paul does not say, “We think” we are conquerors. He says, “We are conquerors.” Nothing can get between us and between Jesus. We live each day in the arms of the Shepherd who holds us tightly as we walk through this life. He even holds us tightly when it comes time to walk through the doors of death. “Whether we live we live unto the Lord and whether we die we die unto the Lord, whether we live therefore or die, we are the Lords.” In 1987 there was an airplane crash in Detroit. Only one little girl survived the crash. Those who found her suggested that her body had been protected by her mother who had died in the crash. Today we live each day of our lives on this earth confident that we are wrapped in the arms of Jesus, arms that hung on a cross for ours and arms that hold us tight in the this life and for all eternity. Scan the horizon. Neither death, nor life, neither angels or 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. Amen.