

February 11, 2018
Romans 8:35-39
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“Only Me”

Good morning! After she woke up, a woman told her husband, "Last night I dreamed that you gave me a pearl necklace for Valentine's day. What do you think it means?" "You'll know tonight." he said. That evening, the man came home with a small package and gave it to his wife. Delighted, she opened it to find a book entitled "The Meaning of Dreams"

Whatever your dreams are for yourself and for Creekside or your thoughts about love you prepare for Valentine's Day, I hope they include some reflection on God love for us through Jesus Christ. I bet this passage from Romans 8 is familiar to many of you. It is one of my favorites, not only from the Book of Romans, but from the entire New Testament. Christ's love is especially good news if you grew up with an image of God which was harsh, judgmental, or unforgiving. We all read or experience the Bible selectively: that is, no one comes to an understanding of God completely objectively. How could we? God cannot be measured and contained and documented; we have to see God through the lens of our own experience and our experiences with other people. That is why it's vital to keep coming back to the Bible in light of new experiences, and to have humility about what understanding we bring, and a willingness to be open to new understanding. No one understands God completely. Let me say that again: No one understands God completely. The Bible tells us again and again that God's understanding is far beyond our own, and that God and God's work is beyond what we can imagine.

So of course, it's natural -- probably unavoidable -- for us to equate God's love and Christ's love with the love that we've experienced from other people. If you had a father who was strong and fair and

protective and loving, you are blessed. Not everyone gets that. Many people don't even have a steady male parent in their lives. Even worse, some people experienced fathers who were unfeeling, distant, neglectful, or even abusive. If this is your experience of a father -- or mother -- or any relationship which you equate with God, then there is some translating to do. Some re-orientation from our human experience to what the Bible says about God and God's love for us in Christ.

The verses from Romans 8 immediately prior to the ones which are part of our today are the Apostle Paul posing a series of rhetorical questions -- Paul loved rhetorical questions -- and because they are rhetorical questions, the answers are obvious. And the answer is the same for all of the questions. Let's see if you know the answer to Paul's questions: If God is for us, who is against us? No one. Who will bring any charge against God's elect? No one. It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? No one. And finally, the question I want to be sure we consider this morning, who will separate us from the love of Christ? No one.

Paul does a sneaky thing in this passage -- like all good speakers and writers, he asks a question and then he answers it. His question was Who will separate us from the love of Christ? And then Paul goes on to ask a series of What questions "will hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril or sword?" We of course, as listeners are being wound up to say No, no, no, no, *none* of those things can separate us from the love of Christ. Paul gives the definitive answer in verses 37 and 38: a ringing refutation of earthly and heavenly powers, and a bold proclamation of the love of God in Christ Jesus:

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, not 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.

That, brothers and sisters, is a pretty inspiring list. Nothing in all creation pretty much covers anything that could separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. Good news, right?

I'm going to go out on a limb though, and disagree with the Apostle Paul. He makes a strong case, he's a fantastic writer and rhetorician, and he is a saint and the foremost theologian of Christianity and all, but in the midst of all those No ones! And Nothings! I think Paul missed something in this passage which can indeed separate us from the love of God in Christ. I bet you know what it is, even if you haven't read the title of today's sermon. That title, for those of you who are scrambling for your bulletin, is Only Me. I think the correct grammar would be "Only I," but that sounded weird, so I titled the sermon "Only Me," as the only thing which can separate us from the love of Christ. Of course, I don't mean *me* personally -- God forbid -- I mean only ourselves. Only I have the power to separate myself from the love of God in Christ.

There is some irony in the fact that I can accomplish something that neither angels, powers, rulers, nor anything else in all creation is able to do. This is not because of my own power, it is because of my weakness. It is because of God's will to give us free will. I can choose, any of us can choose, to misunderstand, ridicule, or reject the love of God in Christ Jesus. Perhaps this goes back to us being misunderstood, ridiculed, or rejected in human relationships. This has happened to all of us, and it's painful; it can be a pain we live with and struggle with for years. But Paul tells us, and I am here to remind you that God's love does not depend on how other people have treated us, or how we have treated other people, or even how we have treated ourselves. Christ loved us and died for us while we were yet sinners. Christ loved and died for the people who have sinned against us. Nearly every Sunday we say the words of Christ together as the Lord's Prayer -- whatever words are most familiar to you: forgive us our debt as we forgive our debtors; forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; or forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. That is the love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord. I cannot keep God from loving anyone; I cannot keep God from loving everyone, but only I can choose whether or not to accept God's love for me.

There is a debate in different Christian traditions about whether accepting God's love in Christ is a one-time event, or something we have to do repeatedly. My answer is "Yes." Here's why I think we need both a singular event and constant renewal: every journey of faith begins somewhere. It doesn't have to be a huge, dramatic conversion experience where we make an epic change from sinner to saint. Praise God it is like that for some people, including Paul. But even for those of us who have been coming to church for as long as we can remember, who had parents or grandparents or teachers or friends who encouraged us in faith and showed us Christ's love, that love is not ours until we accept it and claim it. No one can accept Christ's love for us, and no one can take it away unless we let it go.

And here's where constant renewal comes in for me. I'm on the fence, frankly, about whether a one-time conversion experience assures our salvation and eternal life in heaven with Christ Jesus. I am completely convinced, though, that the way we live in this life and the way we share Christ's love with other people matters a lot. I am not talking about salvation by works where we earn the grace of Christ, or work our way into heaven. I mean that the way we treat other people here and now, what we say about the love of Christ and what we do about the love of Christ may determine whether someone else accepts that love for themselves. And that's a really big deal. If we are to be more than conquerors, we have to be concerned about more than ourselves in the next life, we have to witness to Christ's love with the people we come in contact with in this life, too. Christ's love is not only for our personal salvation, it has the power to transform the world.

This morning I will be offering the service of anointing for anyone who wishes to come forward while we sing our closing hymn. If you have never accepted the love of God through Jesus Christ, you may wish to be anointed for blessing and courage to do so. I'd be happy to talk to you, or you can ask someone else here at Creekside more about that. If you would like to renew your acceptance of Christ's love, and would like prayer for strengthening of your faith or healing of body or spirit, you are invited to come forward for anointing, and the group will be invited to lay hand on you in prayer when we are finished.