

Nothing Shall Separate Us

Ordinary Time

July 12 -26

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – “Set Your Mind”

July 12, 2020 – [Romans 8:1-11](#)

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – “Creation Waits”

July 19, 2020 – [Romans 8:12-25](#)

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – “More Than Conquerors”

July 26, 2020 – [Romans 8:26-39](#)

Having come through the “safer-at-home” directives for the COVID-19 pandemic this spring (we pray we have come through), or perhaps on the threshold of another quarantine this fall (if the reported surge in the virus comes to pass), it seems a perfect time for a worship series titled “Nothing Shall Separate Us!” And we do it without irony. We do it with confident faith, as Paul did in Romans, chapter 8. This chapter is so profound that more than one series could come from these words. But we offer this series now as a reminder that no matter what the world might throw at us, no matter what our own brokenness might uncover, no matter how far we may feel from everyone and from God, we are confident that, as the body of Christ, nothing shall separate us.

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – “Set Your Mind”

July 12, 2020 – [Romans 8:1-11](#)

INTRODUCTION

Here we are in the midst of summer, wondering how we will hold on to folks when summer fun calls. Of course, COVID-19 might have something to say about what and where and when we can gather, even out in the wilderness of the great land of ours. But that might make the urge to get out and go even stronger. So, how can we ensure that folks will include worship in their busy summer schedules? By making it as accessible as possible. Remember during the quarantine? How you bent over backward to find ways to connect people? Maybe you livestreamed your services; maybe you set up online Bible studies; maybe you had email chains, or even letter-writing campaigns? Whatever you did then, you should be doing now.

One of the results of the various means of reaching out during the “safer-at-home” period is an extended reach for churches and other organizations. Many churches were able to reach more people through their online presence than during in-house worship. Some of those folks might still be watching and wanting some sort of connection. So, even when you can be face-to-face with the folks who gather week by week, don’t forget those who may be a part of your extended “parish.” The added benefit is that when members of the congregation are traveling, it will be easy for them to plug in and “be present,” even when they are away. “Nothing shall separate us.” Physical presence is only part of the body that we are—only a part of what keeps us connected.

So, what do we celebrate in this series? Connection! Nothing shall separate us, remember? So, this series is about how we experienced the closeness of God in our apartness. Find individuals and families who can tell their stories of experiencing God during the quarantine. Maybe you feel like you’ve told all those stories, but ask again. Ask who wants to share and find new voices and new stories. Or find some stories of joining together again, overcoming the fear and the distance to feel gathered up into the fellowship of the body again or for the first time. Find an online voice, someone who found you not on the street where you live, but through the computer where you spoke into the airwaves. Even now, as you observe social distancing in the sanctuary, as your greeting habits have changed, as your offering collection has transformed, what is it about your relationship with God that speaks loudly of connection?

Remember to start first with our relationship with God; it will naturally spill over into our other relationships. But we're setting our minds on staying close to God, who has promised to stay close to us and promised that nothing will separate us; and we can lean into that promise. Our songs this week are about the decision to follow, about the hand that holds us as we do, and about the joy of being in the Lord. Songs such as "I am Thine, O Lord" (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 419), "I Come with Joy to Meet My Lord" (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 617), and "You Are Mine" (*The Faith We Sing*, 2218) speak to us of this choosing and this being claimed.

We are in our green period, this Ordinary Time summer cycle. But that doesn't mean we can't enhance the space with examples of colors from across the summer spectrum. Many spiritual leaders have expressed the value of finding God in a garden, so bring in examples of gardens, flowers, even produce of various kinds. Let it be a community garden. Plan a virtual tour of the grounds around the church, if you can, or invite members to video a walk through their own spaces. Use these videos for the online community or show them during gathering time or prayer time during worship in the sanctuary.

The goal is to remind everyone that the community is bigger than what you can see in the sanctuary. Connection is more than the faces around them; it is the presence of the virtual community, live or delayed that represents the ever-present God who calls us together as one. Nothing shall separate us.

PREACHING NOTES

"Who will rescue me from this body of death?" To preach Romans 8, you have to back up a few verses to see what question Paul is attempting to answer. He ends chapter 7 with what sounds like a personal outburst of his own sinfulness. "For I do not do the good that I want, but the evil that I do not want is what I do" (Romans 7:19). This final passage from chapter 7 is one that redeems the person of Paul in many people's eyes. To be so brutally honest, to admit to his own failings, to confess his own wrestling with sin in his own body and life, makes him more human, more like us; and we can sympathize. More than that, we can feel a little bit, or maybe even a lot, better about our own inadequacies. If even Paul can struggle, we think that maybe our struggles aren't so bad.

Except that isn't why Paul ended chapter 7 that way. He wasn't going for solidarity with us poor sinners. He might not have even been talking about himself. Most of the letter to the Romans is written in a dialogic style, where Paul takes on a dual persona to debate and argue and present his ideas. So, this might have been a technique that he was using to wrap up the first section of the epistle and introduce the second section.

However, Paul wasn't averse to using his own life to make his point. And he was well aware of his own shortcomings. So, why not allow this moment of personal privilege – or personal shame – to set up what he intends to say? Phillips Brooks famously said that “preaching is bringing truth through personality.” So, here is Paul bringing this truth through the personality of his own life.

Except that it isn't about Paul. Or rather, it is about Paul, but not only Paul. It is about Paul as a representative of all of us. It is about the human condition—a human condition of ultimate helplessness to bring about our own salvation; or, in Paul's words, to rescue us from a body of death.

Thankfully, we don't have to rescue ourselves. We have been rescued already. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” There is much to unpack here, more than any one sermon can handle, frankly. But before getting into all of that, pause here a moment. Stand in the grace and the freedom that these verses share. Celebrate the gift; taste the life that is on offer here. Revel in it, as Paul does, before attempting to understand it.

Realize how countercultural this faith thing is. We nod along and mumble, “Thank you, Jesus” without grasping the depth of the gift, the radical nature of grace. Our culture is a “can-do” culture, with a “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” kind of faith. To begin with the proclamation that there is something you can't do is to swim against that tide. To admit that you are helpless in the face of your own sin is a shame and an embarrassment in the climate of our culture. Yet, that is the crux of Paul's argument. To skip over this makes everything that follows empty and powerless. It is only by diving into the depths of Paul's plea, “Who will rescue me...?” that we can begin to experience the glory of what Christ has done for us and in us.

And what is that? How do we describe this gift? “No condemnation” is how Paul describes it. No judgment. Freedom, freed from a law whose only purpose was to

burden, to condemn. The freedom to live. Really live. That's the gift. Yes, it is life eternal, but that life begins now, in the freedom of the grace of Jesus Christ, the Resurrected one. And this Christ will "give life to your mortal bodies" (8:11). meaning we don't have to wait, meaning that this isn't just about someday, but about this day, right now, here. The gift is yours.

Conditions? Well, yes; to live this life, to claim this freedom, there is an invitation to which we need to respond. "There is now no condemnation," writes Paul, "for those who are in Christ." "In Christ." What might Paul mean by "in Christ"? Keep reading.

Later he contrasts "in the flesh" with "in the Spirit." And we have to be careful here. Flesh doesn't mean flesh; it doesn't mean just bodily things. Paul doesn't argue that bodies are bad and anything done in the body is to be avoided. Many have gone astray with this interpretation. Yes, when he lists "works of the flesh" there are bodily sins on that list, but there are also spiritual sins like idolatry included. Paul wouldn't argue that bodies are bad if he wants to argue that this gift of life comes to our mortal bodies!

Perhaps one way to translate this duality would be to talk about self-directed and spirit-directed. Living guided only by self leads to death, Paul argues, but guided by the Spirit is to know the fullness of life. Living by the Spirit takes at the outset, Paul argues, a surrender of self. It takes an admission that you are powerless in the face of your own sin. Too often, we want to use our faith, we want to use Jesus, as an add on, as a "spiritual booster," as commentator Blair Alison Pogue calls it (*Feasting on the Word, Year A*, Vol.3, p.231). It is something extra to get us over the hump.

But we are the hump. The very thing that needs to be moved out of the way for the Spirit to take up residence in us, so that we can be "in Christ" is ourselves. Notice it says, "in Christ," not Christ in us. We are subsumed in Christ; it is not our wills, but Christ's will that guides us.

Our fear here is that somehow we will be less ourselves when we surrender to Christ. But, in fact, the opposite is true. We become more of ourselves. This is what Paul means when he says this Spirit will give life to our mortal bodies. We are more fully ourselves when we set our minds on the things of the Spirit. When

we set aside what this culture calls “looking out for number one,” then we become more truly alive.

That’s the invitation. Set your mind on Christ. Set your mind on the things of the Spirit. Then live out the salvation that is ours in Christ, every day and today.

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – “Creation Waits”

July 19, 2020 – [Romans 8:12-25](#)

INTRODUCTION

“We are debtors.” That’s the opening statement for our text this week. We are debtors. We’ll focus more on the text in our preaching notes, but here we will state that the obvious learning from this statement is that we are not alone. If we were fully self-sufficient, self-made, self-actualized, then we wouldn’t be in debt to anyone or anything. But our text declares the opposite, which means on one level at least that we are in relationship. Simply by living in the world, we are in relationship. We can ignore it; we can deny it; we can feel it isn’t so, as we wrestle with our loneliness, but to exist is to be in relationship.

Our worship, then, ought to be a celebration of relationship—first with God; we are debtors to God, who gave us the gift of life and the gift of salvation. So, our worship is full of songs that give thanks to the Creator and Redeemer God. We celebrate this gift as we sing and pray, acknowledging that we belong not just to ourselves, but to God.

Second, our debt is to the community of faith. We have been sustained and strengthened by those who have gone before and those who surround us now. Here is a place for testimony, where we thank the wider community, individually and collectively, for how they have been instrumental in our lives. Or we have a prayer station where we can write a note to be posted on a wall somewhere, saying thank you to someone who has been a “godsend” for us in our journey of faith. Here we could witness again how we were sustained during the quarantine by members of the church family who did something significant for us. It is a way of honoring one another.

It is also important to note that our debt is even larger than we might imagine. Our relationships are all inclusive in a way we often forget. Paul writes that “all creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God” (8:19). We are woven into the very fabric of creation, connected to everything that is. It might not be Earth Day here in the midst of July, but that doesn’t mean we can’t give thanks for creation when we gather to worship the Creator. Pictures of the beauty that surrounds us could enhance our worship space today, projected or printed and hung. Maybe you could ask for some vacation photos to bring the wider world into the worship space.

Our color is still the green of ordinary time, but also now the green of living things. Let the altar be draped with the colors of creation, greens and blues and pinks and yellows—all pointing to the variety and wonder of the world around us. Let’s be clear, however, we are not worshiping creation. We are standing as a part of creation, woven together in relationship, realizing that our sinfulness damages not just ourselves, but all of creation, and asking God for the forgiveness that will enable us to be partners with creation in the stewardship and preservation of what God has made. Creation waits for us to be who we were created to be.

PREACHING NOTES

Paul could have used a marketing course; don’t you think? You can’t get too far by telling people that they need to suffer. Talk about the benefits and not the burdens; talk about the joys and not the heartache. We always have to start with something like “OK, he didn’t really mean that . . .”

Paul doesn’t mean that bodies are bad. The whole spirit versus flesh thing is wildly misunderstood. In our current context, one way to reinterpret that dichotomy would be to say, “if you live according to self, you will die; but if by the Spirit - the love of God and others - you put to death the desires of the self in isolation, you will live.”

OK, it doesn’t flow like Paul’s prose, but it helps us see the point he is making. Can we live acknowledging our obligations? Can we live as debtors? Not to ourselves. We hear that – “you owe it to yourself!” Paul argues that our ultimate debt is to God, to grace. We owe it to love.

We owe it to those who have loved us when we weren't all that loveable. We owe it to those who saw in us what we couldn't see for ourselves. We owe it to those who let us be wrong because that was the only way we would learn.

We are debtors to love. We are debtors to the Spirit who shaped us, who claimed us, who offers us a future with hope and fulfillment and joy. And we experienced that Spirit most vividly through those who walked beside us every step of the way. Those may have been our parents, our teachers, fellow students, or a combination of all the above and more; maybe it was the church that nurtured us and told us that we were worthy of loving, that we were the beloved of God and it was an honor to guide and shape and love us.

We are all debtors; we like to think we are free and unfettered, but we are bound together in human community. And the truth is that we are better that way. We are able to be glorified, to reach our full potential, to claim the gift of eternity, because of the debts we accumulate, because of the relationships we are blessed to live in, and because of the community that we are becoming.

It is our privilege to suffer in service to those relationships. But it is not just the human relationships to which we are indebted. We are in relationship with all creation. That's what Paul says. The whole creation, he writes. Groaning in labor pains, hurting because of what it wants to birth, what it wants to bring forth. Of course, we say, he's talking spiritually, he's talking metaphorically, about spiritual matters, not physical ones. Or is he? It seems that Paul is hinting that our salvation is tied with the bondage and decay of creation. The fate of the world, the fate of the planet is woven into our fate, into our future and our hope.

Not only that, but all that God has made relies on us—not just us, but our better selves, our true selves, our lives as the sons and daughters of God—which is a roundabout way of saying that we treat our world as though it were a part of God, and a part of us.

It is not God; that's an important distinction to make. We don't worship the creation. We aren't tree worshipers and mountain disciples; we're not grass gurus (any kind of grass, for that matter!) or flora and fauna followers. No, we are followers of Jesus the Christ, worshipers of the Creator of all that we see and all that we are. Creation is not God. Yet, we get a glimpse of the Creator when we

comprehend the creation. We know the artist when we examine and protect the work of art. We commune with the author when we spend time in the writing.

There is urgency in what we do. Things aren't getting better on their own. We need to take an active part in building the kin-dom of God. Creation waits.

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – More Than Conquerors

July 26, 2020 – [Romans 8:26-39](#)

INTRODUCTION

This house shall be a house of prayer. That isn't the text for this week. But it is a sentiment behind the thrust of Romans 8:26-39. We are about prayer this week: prayer that transforms, prayer that equips and enables, prayer that overcomes, prayer that conquers. Worship this week should be centered around prayer.

Some might argue that it is always centered around prayer. Perhaps this is true. But often we don't realize how prayer affects and transforms the worship that we do. Here is where we need to remind ourselves that praise singing, for example, is prayer to God. It isn't really about making ourselves feel good (although it can do that). It isn't really about bringing the community together by engaging in shared activities (although it certainly does that). Praise singing is really about prayer, about praying prayers of praise to the one who created us, the one who redeemed us, the one who sustains us. Let prayer be the center of worship today.

That might mean taking a moment to remind folks what we're about when we worship. It might mean dwelling in the moment a little bit longer and taking a higher look at what we're doing. Stop the proceedings for a moment and draw the congregation's attention to what is happening and dwell in the silences from time to time. Silence, which is in short supply in our society and much of our worship, can be a time when we can draw near to the living Presence of God. So, how do we create spaces for people to experience silence in the midst of our busy and sometimes overfull worship services?

Maybe this summer day is a day for slowing down. Sing (if we are back to singing together) something more meditative, something that allows folks space to think as they sing, to enter into the prayer moment.

There might be some who might be fine with silence but have trouble with stillness. So, prayer stations would help them fill the silence with movement. Invite them to light a candle, post a thought, gather with a friend and pray together.

It would be good to extend the prayer spaces beyond the sanctuary too, so that as they enter and as they leave, the congregation is invited to be in a spirit of prayer. Let the fellowship time be one of praying together, of sharing concerns and joy and then give a ritual (“We lift this up to the Lord”, “Hear our prayer”) as an option for how people can converse together with God as a part of the conversation. Let the prayer wall not just be behind the sanctuary doors, but in the common areas, even outside, if that is feasible. Let others see and then add to the prayers of the community of faith. How do we advertise ourselves as a “house of prayer” for all God’s people?

PREACHING NOTES

The Spirit intercedes? We understand all these words. We have a good understanding of how they go together in the sentence that they form. But what exactly does it mean to say that the Spirit intercedes? This may seem like a set of idle questions, mere theological speculation. It may seem like over attention to word play in the scripture text, chasing a rabbit that will lead nowhere. But, in fact, it is a core reality of faith. We don’t know how to pray.

That is a bold statement that you could probably refute by naming many prayer warriors in your congregation. But again and again, when congregations are asked what they struggle with most, prayer is at the top of the list. It began with the first followers of Jesus: “Lord, teach us to pray.” We can analyze that request all we want, but the truth is, prayer escapes us. Oh, we can bow our heads and mumble some words. We can follow the lines on our bulletin or screen. But when it comes to the satisfaction of a well-grounded and satisfying prayer life, most will confess to being less than content.

So, what grace does Paul provide here to tell us that when we struggle for words, the Spirit is there? And that the words don't matter all that much in the end? Or rather the words don't lead. The heart leads; the spirit leads; the words follow. That's Paul's point.

Then, to add to the joy and the blessing, Paul says that the Spirit leads with love. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" Nothing, that's the response to such a question. Nothing in this world, or beyond it, can cause Christ to stop loving us, stop calling us, stop leading us. Nothing. In all these things, we are more than conquerors. What things? The things that work to convince us that we aren't loved, that we aren't worthy of love, that we can't experience and know that love. All those things. Paul names them as "hardship or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword." Quite a list, don't you think? And most of it doesn't seem to apply to the average person in the pew. At least until you think a little more deeply and recognize that the sword might be the sword of the tongue that James talks about. Persecution is rampant in our society, evidenced by the number of young African American men killed week by week, the Jewish cemeteries and synagogues defaced, and the women abused by those who are supposed to love and care for them. Persecution is closer than we realize.

Whether the hardship and distress is personal or societal, that it exists is undeniable. But can we take Paul at his word and claim the victory that he offers in the love of Christ? What about that often misused and misquoted verse "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his promise" (8:28)? Preachers, please take a moment and discuss this verse. It isn't a prosperity gospel promise— love God and everything will go well with you. It isn't a measuring rod to determine the size of your faith, meaning that if there are bad things happening, you must not be faithful enough, you must not be one of the called. In fact, it has nothing to do with the circumstances of your life at all. It isn't, in the end, about you. This is a statement about God.

The promise here is that there is nothing in your life that God can't take and bring a blessing for you or for others. In all things, notice the *in*. This isn't a declaration that all things are good. "It's all good" is a mantra that no one really believes, no one who has lived anyway. Paul isn't spouting this feel good statement. But, he is standing firm on the belief that even the bad that happens, even the brokenness

within you, even your worst experiences can lead to something amazing, if you are guided by the Spirit, that same Spirit that intercedes for you with sighs too deep for words.

Here is the conquering. Here is the victory. Not in the perfect life. Not even in the overcoming of evil or the vanquishing of sin. The conquering is in allowing the Spirit to lead, to intercede for you in your prayer life, which is your whole life.

This is the secret to the prayer thing that everyone struggles with. Prayer is a time, we think, a moment or more in our lives when we stop and close our eyes and bow our heads. Prayer, we think, is the words that we say or the posture that we take. Prayer is the obedience, we think, to giving God a part of our day. The routine that we follow even when we don't feel like it. That's prayer. And of course, it is. All of that is indeed prayer and necessary for a vital prayer life. But a life of prayer is something so much more than just that, more than just those moments when we stop. It is more than just those closet moments or those kneeling moments, or those tears or laughter moments. A life of prayer is just that, a life. It is all of life. Constant prayer doesn't mean mumbling prayer words all the time like a computer subroutine running underneath everything else we do. No, it is living in the constant awareness of the Presence. It is knowing that the Spirit is interceding in our lives, even when we've forgotten to bow our heads and fold our hands. It is inviting that Presence, leaning into that Presence, longing for that Presence, trusting in that Presence, even in those moments when we don't feel it because that's when faith kicks in and tells us that even the unseen is real.

The gift you have to offer today, preacher, is the gift of unending prayer—the gift of a life rich with the Presence of God. Don't stint on telling this good news. Because even the ones who aren't asking how to pray better are asking how to pray.