

Nothing Can Separate Us
Sermon by Renata Eustis
July 30, 2017
Pentecost 8A 2017
Romans 8: 26-39

This is the second of two sermons on the 8th chapter of Romans. Last week, I said that this 8th chapter is what I would want to have if I were stranded on a desert island. And this section of the chapter is by far my favorite part. I love the first part about the Spirit interceding for us with sighs too deep for words—that's got to be one of the most beautiful descriptions of prayer—ever.

And my extended family—most especially my great aunt—lifted up verse 28 so much it was ingrained into my very being: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” I could share at length about how those words both confused and sustained me.

But as important as these verses are, it is the last eight verses that are—for me—the most important words of scripture. They say more clearly—in my estimation—than any other words of scripture that God is for us. God is on our side. God's love for us is unshakeable. Nothing can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus.

It doesn't get any better than that.

God loves us. That is the simplest faith statement we could make.

But it is no simple thing to believe that.

There are so many, many things that get in the way. Paul has his own list in verses 35 and 38 and 39. Hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword, death, life, angels, rulers, things present, things to come, powers, height, depth. All these get in the way of our knowing—our being convinced—our feeling in the depths of our being that God loves us. You might have another version of this list or you might be able to find what gets in the way for you on this list. Take just a moment and reflect on what it is that makes it hard for you to experience God's unshakeable love for you. (pause)

I'm not going to ask you to share what those obstacles are. But whatever it is, when we get to the root of it, I think it comes down to some version of not being worthy—not being someone God could love.

My oldest daughter, Clare and I will be going to China this week. It feels momentous—like a pilgrimage rather than a vacation. This is our first time back since Clare was adopted 20 years ago. We are going to the place where Clare was born and we'll meet with woman who was the orphanage director when Clare was there. We are hoping to fill out the picture of Clare's early life and get a sense of where she came from.

Preparing for this trip has been a journey in itself. We are not going on a tour, so we've been figuring out things on our own—but it hasn't really been on our own. A veritable village of people—both here in the U.S. and in China—has come forward to help us make this journey. It's hard not to see the loving hand of God in it.

A couple of days ago, Clare came to me with a story she had found in the journal, *Foreign Policy*, of all places. It is a deeply touching story that has changed the way she understands her own story—and she said, “I don’t believe I found this story by accident.”

It’s the story of a young woman, named Jenna Cook, who, like Clare, was adopted as an infant from China. As a college student at Yale, she gets a fellowship to go to China to document the process of searching for her birthparents, with the idea that this could serve as a guide for others who wanted to search.

Jenna had a very straight-forward plan. She would visit three government offices to look for her records and hand out missing person flyers on the street where she had been found. Jenna did that but then something happened that changed everything.

A friend of a friend who was a Chinese journalist wrote an article with the headline: “Dad, Mom, I really hope that I can give you a hug. Thank you for bringing me into this world.”

The story went viral—people contacted Jenna from all over China. Her story struck a chord because so many people have relinquished children—for many reasons including the one-child policy, the need to have a son, poverty, teen-age pregnancy and disability. Almost everyone has been touched by this loss—or knows someone who has. Jenna’s efforts unleashed a national expression of grief that had been bottled up for decades.

Jenna has not yet found her birth parents. But she met with 50 birth families who had left their baby girls on that same street in 1992. She felt their pain.

One birth father said, “In my wife’s heart she really wants to find our daughter. Everywhere we go, she’s always thinking, ‘maybe that’s her!’” Another said, “I just want to have a look and know if she has a good life now. I don’t need anything else.”

What was so striking about this story is the way that Jenna and the birthparents of missing children were able to represent the other’s missing part. In Jenna’s words, “Parents would sob, ‘I’m so sorry. Do you forgive me?’” and I would reply, “I forgive you, I forgive you,” as if on behalf of the birth daughter they might never again see.

And likewise, Jenna was able to finally say, “For 20 years, I’ve never forgotten you. Do you remember me? I heard them reply, “Of course we remember you.” I asked, “If I had cried less, if I had been more beautiful, would you have kept me?” They said, “You were the most beautiful baby. How we have missed you.”

Even though they were not each other’s blood family, they held and soothed each other.

This story is a picture for me of what it means that God’s love for us is unshakeable.

Even in the midst of the hardships and perils of the one-child policy, poverty and much more—after years of separation, the love of the birth parents for their child is still there. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Nothing.

Even the good life of a secure existence in the U.S., loving parents and a Yale education couldn’t give Jenna what she longed to know in the depths of her being—that she was loved by the people who brought her into this world.

The way that Jenna and these parents of missing children could stand-in for each other is such an expression of the creative and inexhaustible power of love. This is still an imperfect world but in the midst of all the pain and doubt and separation, love is the power that can't be defeated.

Through the Holy Spirit, God is tirelessly searching for a way into our hearts and minds—searching for ways to convince us how gift of Jesus shows us how completely we are loved.

When it sinks in, sometimes over time and sometimes in a flash—we live more often in that place of knowing who we really are. Life changes when the fundamental truth of your life is “I am loved by God.” When we live in that truth, we become like Jesus—we become people whose lives are defined by love. We love because we are loved.

A few weeks ago, there was a story of a dramatic rescue of 6 people who had been caught in a powerful rip tide on a beach in Florida. The people who had swum out to rescue them had also gotten caught in the rip tide and couldn't get back to shore. Lifeguards had called for a rescue boat.

But a woman on the beach just could not stand there and do nothing. She couldn't let a rip tide stand between her and saving these people's lives. So, she convinced 20 other people to form a human chain to reach them. It worked and all of the people were rescued.

The most amazing thing about this story to me is that some of the people in the chain couldn't swim—but linked together with all those other people they were able to save the lives of people who were in danger of drowning.

That for me is a picture of the church—a picture of us. On any given day, we are at various strengths of faith. There are times when we are convinced of God's unshakeable love for us and times when our faith is very shaky. But we are linked together in a community that together holds on to God's unshakeable love. And we reach out to others who are drowning in the pain of self-doubt and a sense of unworthiness. When we do that we express God's unshakeable love for *them*—even when we're not sure of it ourselves.

There is indeed nothing—nothing inside of us—nothing outside of us—that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Thanks be to God. Amen.