

## **“GOD WITH US**

PSALM 128, MATTHEW 13:31-33, 44-52

ROMANS 8:26-39

MARKET SQUARE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN  
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Our Epistle lesson is a continuation of last week’s reading in Romans. This entire section, all of Romans 8 is about God’s unshakable love for us. Last week, we were reminded that we are children of God and heirs with Christ, meaning we have a part in not only the suffering but also the glory of Christ. We trust in God knowing that we are being redeemed and God’s purposes are being worked out despite the suffering we and our world know at this present time.

Today’s text is the celebratory end note to the entire chapter. It ends with the beautiful and well-known lines often read at funerals:

“For 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, no anything else in all of creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

What God accomplished in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection assures us that God’s love is sovereign. God has already acted to save the human family, and not only us, but all of creation. Therefore, we are invited to live as those trusting in God and God’s love. Paul assures us that nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate us from this unshakable sovereign love.

I have read this text countless times and yet upon reading it this week, I noticed something new. Life, rather than being listed as the antithesis of death (as in life and death, good and evil), is listed as something that might separate us from God. At funerals, we readily affirm that death does not separate us from God, in fact, it is a full welcoming into the heart of God. Death is a union into God. But life, I hadn’t considered life as that which separates. But of course, life with all its delights and disappointments can be a cause of separation, at least on our part.

Our culture values the self-made man (I use the word “man” very intentionally here). We believe that we are masters of our destiny and that everyone has the ability to harness their strength, power, and inner resources to make of themselves whatever they wish. We have been told that we are special and we can accomplish whatever we set our minds to if we but work hard enough and make the required sacrifices. Then we can revel in the delights of this world, which society tells us are those money can buy.

This belief that financial wealth is directly related to a person’s intelligence, determination, giftedness, and strength has distorted our view of human worth and encouraged us to place power in the hands of the wealthy few while judging the poor for their poverty as if it were their doing. We have placed value on those with wealth and devalued the lives and worthiness of those without financial means. This disregards Jesus clear call to serve the poor for in serving the poor, we are serving Christ. It disregards God’s claim that we and they are children of God. It places us in the seat of judgement - doling out worth and legitimacy. It makes us into little gods, who have the authority to not only determine the value of human life but to make of ourselves and our world what we will.

Here is the danger in the current discussions of Medicaid in relation to the attempt to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act. Underlying much of the rhetoric is the belief that those who are dependent upon Medicaid are somehow less valuable or worthy because they are less intelligent, less determined, less gifted, or less willing to work hard and sacrifice. There is an assumption that people who are poor are lazy, which is simply the reverse of the believe that hard work will earn you wealth and power. The shadow side of the self-made man is the disdain for the poor. In other words, if you are not a self-made man, it is your fault because you didn’t work hard enough to make it.

The delights of the world not only distort our view of human worth, they also distract us and numb us. Money, material possessions, the latest greatest tech item, and even food have a way of grabbing our attention. Our focus is easily turned inward to our own desires, our comfort, our satisfaction and we seek happiness in the things of this world.

Now, I’m all for a good meal and a pedicure. It isn’t that creature comforts preclude our devotion to God. But our desire for comforts becomes a distortion of our relationship with God when we believe we deserve them or have earned them. As Christians, we are reminded that we are indebted to God, deserving of nothing. This is not intended to make us feel bad but to put us into right relationship with God. It is dependence on a loving God that leads to gratitude and gratitude to freer more joyful living. Paul states it this way, “To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.”

The disappointments, discontentment, and even destruction that life can bring may also cause us to feel isolated us from God. There are those experiences imposed from the outside such as abuse or neglect, which twist our understanding of ourselves such that we see ourselves as unlovable or unworthy, even unworthy of God’s love. Disease or

physical suffering leaves some turned inward, unable to receive or offer love. Addiction takes away our desire for anything but the focus of our addiction. Loss can so consume us we see only that which is missing and fail to notice grace, life, or love.

But Paul contends all these delights, disappointments, and distortions cannot separate us from God. In fact, God has given us the Spirit, which comes alongside us helping us in our weakness and praying when we do not know how. "...the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words, and God who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."

Here God is described as a heart-searcher, as one who knows our inmost thoughts and desires. This God is the one that never abandons us but search us out and loves us still, despite all that this life might use to divide us. To be so known and to still be loved is freeing.

Paul teaches us that the love of God is the deepest truth of the world. To trust that love is to open ourselves to richer and fuller humanness. We are as claimed utterly and completely despite all that seeks to separate us from within and without. Imagine that nothing we have done, can do, or will do will separate us from the love of God because God has already acted to claim us and name us beloved. Certainly, that is freedom - freedom from guilt, freedom from self-hatred, and freedom from self-destructive habits.

This is a freedom offered not because we deserve it. Remember, Paul believes we are slaves to sin. Paul wants to make it quite clear that we are not little gods. Despite what society may tell us, we do not control our own destiny. We are not self-made. Some of us do have more recourses and more opportunities, but you know what Jesus says about that, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded." Those of us with resources and opportunities are expected to work on behalf of others, rather than judge them harshly or undervalue their lives.

Paul reminds us that we are completely dependent upon the love of God. It is when we understand this truth, that we live in right relationship to God and our fellow human beings. When we understand that the love of God is the truest reality in the world and that love extends way beyond us, can we live in the freedom and joy that is offered.

This week has been a hard week for the LGBT community. On Thursday, President Trump tweeted that transgender individuals will be banned from the US military. The same day, the Department of Justice issued an amicus brief stating that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 does not cover employment discrimination based on sexual orientation. The amicus brief does not change the current practice, but these two actions have left LGBT individuals feeling enraged, distraught, and vulnerable.

These actions took place two days before Harrisburg Pride. I mention this because each year Market Square hosts Voices United, a concert highlighting the contributions of the

queer community. As you know, we also staff a booth to ensure a loving presence at Pride. This year we handed out cookies along with almost 600 pins. They read, "Love Finds a Way," and "Be Proud, Be Safe, Be Loved." We also had similar postcards with the church's information on the back.

It seemed particularly poignant this year that we stood in the middle of the Pride festival declaring the greatest truth of the cosmos to a people who have been told over and over that they do not belong and are not worthy. While the President's tweets wound and the Department of Justice's brief cause concern, they are not as real or as true as God's unshakable love. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor Presidents, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor the Department of Justice...will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It is my hope that our presence at Pride and our presence here on the Square will over time proclaim the good news of God's sovereign love to all who need to know the freedom offered - whether it be a young gay man, or a transgender woman, or a person living on the streets, or a businesswoman, or you, or me. The truest truth we can declare is that we are loved, claimed, and redeemed by God and nothing, nothing, can ever take that way or claim a greater authority over us. Therefore, we are free to be and to live for God, ourselves, and others.

So we believe, so let us live.