

“If God is for us, who is against us?”

July 24, 2011

Text: Romans 8:28-39, Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

I.

A man had fallen off a fishing pier into deep water and was about to go under. Another fisherman nearby, hearing his cry for help, said, *How can I help you?*

The drowning man said, *For God’s sake, give me something to hold on to!*

We can relate to that can’t we? In the whirlwind of our lives, with all we have to contend with—day after day, week after week—trying to stay afloat; trying to stay on top of things, trying to stay healthy and well and trying to meet our obligations and fulfill our responsibilities; trying to be a good person, the person God created us to be; trying to feel good about our lives.

Along the way, we *need something to hold on to*. We need a sense about our lives that reassures us.

Everyday we see the wrangling among our elected leaders. Over time, it wears us down. For crying out loud, we shout out: *raise the debt ceiling ... the whole planet knows we have to do it!*

And then we take a deep breath and sort of shake our head at all the separation and distancing—the fragmentation that’s been sweeping across our nation in recent times. Indeed, have our elected leaders ever been more polarized?

And Rupert Murdoch, *you’re not making things any easier! Lord, give us something to hold on to—something real, something we can count on, something that reassures us.*

II.

Part of the meaning of Paul’s letter to the Romans is that God has done precisely that: given us something to hold on to. Indeed, our reading from Romans this morning is a powerful faith affirmation:

If God is for us, who is against us?

In the social, historical context in which Paul was writing, there was much to fear—particularly for believers in Christ. At this point—a couple decades after Jesus’ death and resurrection—our Christian faith was in the early stages of its unfolding. Moreover, there was a lot of confusion over what the faith was about. What was all this about eating the body and drinking the blood?

What did this mean? And why were the followers of this *Christ* so impassioned and committed?

In this context, and for all kinds of reasons, many of the early Christians of this period were persecuted. In other words, there were dangers lurking. With this backdrop, Paul's words have even more meaning for us: ***If God is for us, who is against us?***

Who indeed? And this leads to the related question: *Who will separate us from the love of Christ?*

III.

This reading from Romans 8, along with these probing questions, constitute one of the primary texts for virtually every Funeral or Memorial Service we do in the Christian Church. Certainly, one of the gifts of Romans 8 is that it compels us to deal with ultimate meanings, with matters of life and death.

Understandably, death arouses concerns within us about these final meanings. The last thing any of us wants is separation from our loved ones or separation from God or from love.

Romans 8 understands that we can't help being weighted down by the power of death, by the power of our personal losses and changes about which we can do nothing. We live in the heart beat—day in and day out—of life's unfolding. Around death, there is always the concern about being utterly alone and separate from God.

When I think about how to somehow *wake up* our elected leaders in Washington, sometimes I think we would all benefit from them having to attend their own Memorial Service.

With that in mind, whenever we succumb to our current level of polarization and impasse, we should require them all to take a few days off, go back to their home states and attend their own Memorial Service, a remembering of their lives.

Do we ever think about this—about what people would say about us, about how we would be remembered? There's something about death that helps us see the present with new perspective and sensitivity.

IV.

Anyway, as we think about the power that death holds over us, we are forever in the process of losing some part of ourselves. I think of this with regard to my granddaughters. They're in a beautiful stage now. Precious little miracles of God's creative hand.

But soon, as the years pass by, they will lose their childhood. At some later point, they will lose their youth. Life's unending transitions are forever unfolding.

As with all of us, as the aging process continues—gradually—we lose parts ourselves: our physical prowess, our mental acuity. How often do we think: how cruel?

1. Yet, this is the human situation. We may not like it. At times, it may even anger us and take us to some dark places of alienation and estrangement.
2. However—thanks be to God—death and darkness do not have the final sway over us. For God has come to us in Christ.

Paul knows. He knows about all the things that can tear us apart and separate us from God. In our reading, he names them:

Hardship ... distress ... persecution ... famine ... nakedness ... peril ... sword???

V.

1. We've all known *hardship* on some level. Hey, life is hard ... trying to keep up, trying to pick ourselves up when we get knocked down; making sacrifices, working long hours—sometimes at jobs we don't like. Life is hard.
2. And *distress*. Paul himself, of course, endured all kinds of both hardship and distress. We, too, have our distress—in the work place, with our children and grandchildren, our spouses, our parents. The pressures that build up in our lives:
 - When we're unable to complete a job we know needs completing;
 - or, when we've done all we can do and still, it's not enough.
3. Paul also mentions *persecution*, the violence and injustices that surround us. The struggles of the refugee, the immigrant, the poor person trying to pick themselves up.
4. The mental and psychological anguish of any minority group trying to gain legitimacy; trying to receive fair and equal treatment under the Constitution. Always, there are groups, families, individuals, shoved to the sidelines of life and community.

And Paul goes on, mentioning *famine, nakedness, peril and sword*. But can any of these things separate us from the love of God? This is the question. This is the looming question, too, of our faith. Is there anything in all of creation that can separate us from the love of God which has been revealed to us in Christ?

No! The answer is NO, an emphatic NO. For, as Paul reminds us, *In all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*

If God is for us, who is against us?

VI.

Easily, in our lives, we can grow to where we have all sorts of reservations about God and faith. Why all the injustice and suffering? Why all the lingering inequities.

There's a gripping story about Elaine Pagels, a distinguished professor of humanities at Princeton University. Her specialty is *Early Christianity*. However, she's not particularly a church person. In fact, she had pretty much given up on the church as an institution, thinking it increasingly irrelevant.

In her book, *Beyond Belief*, she begins with a poignant, personal story—which, it turns out, is as powerful witness. On a bright, cold Sunday morning in New York, she interrupts her daily run by stopping in the vestibule of a church to get warm. Two days earlier, her two-and-a-half year-old son had been diagnosed with an invariably fatal lung disease.

Two-and-a-half years-old, barely born and already dying; the most depressing news. We can only imagine her wrenching pain and despair.

Here is how she remembers the scene in the church that day:

*Since I had not been in church for a long time, she starts out, I was startled by my response to the worship in progress—the soaring harmonies of the choir singing with the congregation; and the priest, a woman in bright gold and white vestments, proclaiming the prayers in a clear, resonant voice. As I stood watching, a thought came to me: **here is a church family that, no doubt, knows how to face death ...***

The day after we heard Mark's diagnosis—and that he had a few months, perhaps years, to live—a team of doctors urged us to authorize a lung biopsy, a painful and invasive procedure. How could this help, we asked?

It couldn't, they explained. But the procedure would let them know how far the disease had progressed. Mark was already exhausted by the previous day's ordeal. Holding him, I felt that if more masked strangers poked needles into him in an operating room, he might lose heart—literally—and die.

We refused the biopsy, gathered Mark's blanket, clothes, and Peter Rabbit and carried him home.

Standing in the back of the church, I recognized, uncomfortably, that I needed to be there. Here was a place to be human, to weep without imposing tears upon a child; and here was a diverse community that had gathered to sing, celebrate, to acknowledge common needs, and to deal with what we cannot control or imagine.

VII.

There are no words to describe the pain, the heartbreak, the despair, the sense of powerlessness that people like Elaine Pagels go through. Her son lived two-and-a-half more years, it turns out, to the age of five. Where to turn? What sense to make of it all? How to move on with our living? We hardly know.

We only know that ***If God is for us, who is against us?*** And, ***Who will separate us from the love of Christ?***

Will hardship separate us? Or distress or persecution? Or famine, illness, peril or the sword?

And God's answer, again, is a resounding NO! And that, ***in all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loves us.*** For ***nothing can separate us from God's love ...***

This is the crux of our Christian faith, friends ... that ...

Neither death nor life ... nor angels nor other rulers or powers ... neither the present nor the future ... neither the world above nor the world below. There is nothing in all creation that can ever separate us from the love of God which is our through Christ Jesus our Lord.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*
6701 Miami Lakeway South
Miami Lakes, FL 33014
On the web at www.mlchurch.com

