

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by The Rev. Jan Lamb on Sunday, July 24, 2011.

Proper 12, Romans 8:26-39

I am going to begin on a personal note: I like things simple, straight-forward, and practical. I like things in language I can understand and that doesn't leave a lot of room for confusion. If I were asked to summarize my faith, my beliefs, the foundation of who I am, I would quote three verses of scripture.

First from Micah "And what does the LORD require of you? To do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God."

And then from Isaiah: "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I. Send me!'"

The third would be from today's reading from Paul's letter to the Romans -- "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, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

That's the straight-forward, practical, clear language I need.

There is a Peanuts cartoon that shows Lucy at her 5-cent psychiatric help booth. Charlie Brown has come to ask for advice about life. Lucy says, "Life is like a deck chair on the cruise ship of life, Charlie Brown. Some people place their chairs at the rear of the ship so they can see where they have been. Others place their chairs at the front of the ship so they can see where they are going." Lucy looks at her patient and says, "Which way is your deck chair facing, Charlie Brown?" Good ole Charlie Brown responds glumly, "I can't even get my deck chair unfolded." I can always identify with Charlie Brown.

So often I feel like a klutz in the kingdom of God, a feather-weight in a world of spiritual heavy-weights. Everyone seems to have it together – except me. I have identified myself a Christian since I was old enough to say the word – a long time – and even after many years of trying to follow Jesus, I have come to the conclusion that I'm a spiritual mess.

There is a huge gap between the person I am and the person I want to be. I don't want to be Mother Theresa or Thomas Merton. I just want to be someone who loves God, who serves others more than she serves herself, and who is trying to grow in spirit and truth. I want more victories than defeats. I want my life marked by integrity and righteousness. I want to get rid of the clutter and confusion so I can be faithful to my calling. But the truth is, more often than not, I am tangled up in the distractions and obligations – the "powers, the height, the depth" - that keep me from closeness to God. I want to be consistent in my walk with God. I want more than isolated moments of closeness; I want to walk with God all the time. Like Charlie Brown, I often can't get my deck chair open.

So, when I really feel like a mess, I come back to these words from Paul -- words that remind me that even when I'm not there, God is. I remember that praying is not giving God my never-ending wish list, it is listening to God as God reminds me again and again of His never-ending love. I read that the "first step on the road to prayer is to recognize that none of us knows how to pray as we ought. Prayer isn't rooted in a 'how' but a 'who'. There is no special kit we need to buy; no magic app to download. Prayer is a life of relationship we live into. As we bring our desires to God, we find the Spirit takes our feeble, clumsy, inarticulate prayers to Jesus who makes them his own." "The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to

pray as we ought, but that very 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.”

Several years ago, my friend decided to hire someone to clean her house. Because of a difficult series of circumstances, she felt like the condition of her home had gotten beyond her control and she needed help. She had spoken with a cleaning service, and they had agreed on a list of duties that included dusting, mopping, vacuuming, the usual. The day before the person was scheduled to come for the first time, I called my friend who breathlessly said she couldn't talk because she was frantically cleaning her house. “Why? Isn't your cleaning service coming tomorrow?” I asked. “Oh yes, they are coming but I can't let them see my house like this! What would they think?”

We act the same way with God. We talk ourselves out of commitment because we refuse to come to God as we are. We think we have to wait until we have our act together to approach God. We believe that the way we lived yesterday, last week or last year means that we aren't God material. We think that until we clean up our lives, Jesus will not have anything to do with us. Actually, according to many accounts in the New Testament, Jesus was attracted to the unattractive. He preferred the lost ones over the found, the broken over the whole

It's hard to imagine that God would ever choose us especially once He gets to know us. We think to ourselves, ‘cross Him one too many times, fail Him too often, sin too much, and God will turn His back.’ Three strikes and we're out. We worry that God's love will simply wear out or God will give up on us. So Paul's message to the church in Rome, to the early believers who were being persecuted, who were still trying to sort out what they were to do, was a message of the good news of God in Christ. It is still good news for us.

The bottom line is that we are stuck with God's love whether we want it or not. The words, “nor anything else in all creation” mean that nothing can stop God from loving us. We could rewrite this passage to say, “Neither poor church attendance, nor an inadequate prayer life, nor doubt, not betrayal, nor denial, nor insecurity, nor guilt, nor weakness, nor bad theology, nor even losing our temper can separate us from the love of God.” He loves us even when we don't want Him to love us. He loves us when we are a mess. He loves us when we're like Charlie Brown and can't get our deck chairs unfolded.

Is this hard for you, like it is for me, to grasp? It sounds straightforward the way I like things to be, but in practice, it's not that simple. But then, what of being a follower of Jesus is easy? God's love can sometimes be problematic. It is hard to believe that God not only accepts us, but loves us – no matter what. It is often the case in our culture that we need to earn what we get. Sometimes we receive gifts, but often there are strings attached. So it may seem strange to receive a gift that we did nothing to receive. We are people in bondage – bound by doubt, fear, broken relationships, bad decisions – and the only true release from our captivity is to say “Yes!” to God's inseparable love. That love will continue regardless of how we respond, but our lives will change if we are able to say “Yes.” Sometimes we need to stop fighting the voices inside us that say “you aren't worth loving” We need to let Paul's words speak to the depths of our being. Listen again and let them sink in deep, “Neither death, nor 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.”

So when we struggle to unfold our metaphorical deck chairs, we don't do it alone. When we admit we are a mess and needy, Jesus steps in to help us. Paul tells us that the “Spirit helps us in our weakness; the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” We don't

have to struggle alone. God helps us; we help each other. What a joy to belong to a community of faith where we share each others' sorrows and pains; where we celebrate together successes and victories; where we reach out to our neighbors in Sudan, Belize, Durham, Newton Grove. Where we refuse to stand silently by while children in Africa die at the rate of one every minute from a preventable disease. We rejoice in knowing that while none of us can do it all, together we can do so much more. We can say to each other, "let me get that deck chair for you. Sometimes they are hard to get open."

There's a wonderful story about a sawmill owner who was driving a load of logs to the mill one rainy afternoon. His old truck skidded and ended up in a ditch. The driver couldn't get the truck out of the ditch so he walked up to a nearby farmhouse and asked the farmer if he could pull the truck out with his tractor. "I don't have a tractor, but I have a very fine mule" The truck driver was skeptical but he didn't have much other choice. So the farmer hitched old Sue to the truck. He cracked his whip and said "Come on, Sue." Sue pulled but the truck didn't move. So the farmer cracked his whip again and shouted, "Come on, Maude!" The mule pulled and the truck moved a little. The farmer cracked his whip again and shouted, "Come on, Mack!" And the mule pulled the truck out of the ditch. The driver thanked the farmer and then said, "Why did you call that mule by three different names?" The farmer replied, "Old Sue is blind, and if she thought she was the only one pulling, your truck would still be in the ditch."

We are empowered when we know someone else is pulling with us and for us. We need not go it alone. There is help – human and divine. We must do all we can to follow the lessons of Jesus, but we are not alone in the fight. Paul says, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." And "in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us". Let us go forth into the world, fumbling to unfold our spiritual deck chairs, and rejoicing in the power of the Spirit who helps us in our weakness and in the knowledge that God always loves us as we try in our human ways to live into that love. *AMEN*