

07 July 2020 – Proper 12

1 Kings 3:5-12 · Romans 8:26-39 · Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Sr. Gregory

This passage from Romans has become a bit of a fluffy, feel-good cliché. If you go to craft websites and search for the phrase “nothing can separate us from the love of God”, you can find it emblazoned in a cheerful font on posters, mugs, jewelry, T-shirts, cufflinks, and, of course, face masks. It’s all very capitalist and twee.

But the more time I’ve spent with that phrase, and with these readings, the more uneasy they’ve made me. Not only because of the weird merchandising, and not even because of Paul’s language about predestination and the elect and Jesus’ parable about throwing the evil fish into the furnace of fire, which have been twisted into some truly damaging theologies of condemnation, exclusion, us-and-them.

No – nothing can separate us from the love of God. Not death, or life, or angels, or rulers, or things present, or things to come, and certainly not our own wickedness or weakness or intransigence. *We* cannot separate *ourselves* from the love of God, and that’s what was making me so uneasy. Those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; those whom he justified he also glorified. At no point are they consulted about any of this. God calls and justifies and glorifies whether we like it or not, and it can all seem a bit threatening.

Because there are times when we would really like to separate ourselves from the love of God! When we feel unworthy of it, or afraid of what it might demand, or just not up to the task, because being inseparably connected to the most powerful force in the universe sounds exhausting.

Of course, there is space for all of this. No matter what we go through, as individuals, as a community, as a Church, as a world, nothing can surprise God. In God’s love there is room for our insecurity and fear and exhaustion; there is room for all our missteps and conflict and awkwardness.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God:

not churches

nor Rules

nor abbots

nor vows

nor books

nor cleverness:

nothing can mediate our relationship with God – nothing except Christ, who is God, so that doesn't really count. God is already with us, and no institution or practice or theological framework can make that safe or controlled. To borrow the quote, "he is not a tame lion". Institutions and authorities and practices can express our relationship with God, and perhaps help us see it more clearly, but they can never reduce its immediacy. Anything we try to put between us and God becomes an idol, and God will insist with great patience and love that we pull it down.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God:

not weakness

nor alienation

nor fear

nor despair

nor failure

nor brokenness:

There is no depth we can sink to where Christ has not been, and no height of success that makes any difference next to the Resurrection; no achievement can ever make us worthy of love, and no failure can make us unworthy of it. Our value as humans depends alone on the **immutable fact** of God's love through Christ.

God is with us, as close as yeast is to bread, as close as our heart, as close as our dreams. When we are in prayer, God is with us. When we cannot pray, God is with us. When we are strong, God is with us. When it takes all our energy just to survive, God is with us. Hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword cannot separate us from the love of God: not because these things are irrelevant or unreal, but because they are so very real; and God is with us in whatever is real, whatever is true.

Paul and his contemporaries in facing martyrdom must have had an especially acute sense that life is too short for lies, too short to hold God at arm's length. The deaths of martyrs grab us and every generation, I think, because they are such powerful symbols of truth: a life of love brought to a point of complete integrity. They tell the truth with their bodies, the whole truth about themselves and God and the world, and it makes them Real – Real with a capital R, like the Velveteen Rabbit, if you like, made Real by love.

It is not easy to tell the truth like this. It rarely feels convenient or safe. The practical truth about sin and salvation, embodied in our lives, is too awkward, too painful, too

beautiful, too personal, too strange. And yet when we can speak that truth, it changes the world.

Solomon could have fallen the way of so many other kings, into pride and idolatry and distortion of what matters. He doesn't ask for understanding and discernment because he knows that's what God wants to hear. He asks for them because he feels incompetent and scared. *I'm supposed to have things in hand, but I feel like a child. I do not know how to go out or come in. I don't understand what's happening around me. I don't know how to do the right thing. I can't do this on my own. Please help me.*

And God does. Solomon tells the truth, and it saves him and all of Israel. He becomes fully himself and reflects God's glory and God's wisdom into the world.

That is our calling. I was equally annoyed and delighted to hear George Guiver, in last night's supper reading, put this much better than I could. He says: "Benedict, as we have seen, does not allow us to stay in our inadequacies. We are called to run after a cluster of prizes, all to do with truth: self-knowledge, discovery of our true selves, discovery of the wonder of others in their own selves, and in all of this the deep abyss of the knowledge of God and God's knowledge of us."<sup>1</sup>

This is the treasure in the field, the pearl of great price. The truth makes us free. The truth makes us Real. The truth is Love: immutable, absolute, uncontrollable, incomprehensible Love.

As George Herbert sets it:

Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back,  
    guilty of dust and sin:  
yet quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
    from my first entrance in  
drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning  
    if I lacked anything.

'A guest', I answered, 'worthy to be here.'

Love said, 'You shall be she.'

'- I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,

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1 George Guiver, "Waiting While Running", in *Oneness: The Dynamics of Monasticism* (SCM, 2017), 191

I cannot look on thee.'

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,

'Who made the eyes but I?'

'– Truth, Lord, but I have marred them –

let my shame go where it doth deserve.'

'And know you not', says Love, 'who bore the blame?'

'– My dear, then I will serve.'

'You must sit down', says Love, 'and taste my meat.'

So I did sit and eat.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> George Herbert (1593-1633), "Love (III)", alt.