



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

760 East Broad Street • Columbus Ohio 43205 • (614) 221-6552 • fax (614) 221-5722 • www.bspsc.org

“Nothing Can Separate”

Romans 8:31-35, 37-39

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Reverend Amy Miracle
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, OH

This happened about 20 years ago. Different city. Different church. I was officiating at a wedding for two church members that I knew pretty well.

This is how I began the wedding homily.

“Those two are just perfect for one another.” “They make the perfect couple.” “Just look at them, they are perfect together.”

These words have never been said about the two of you. Neither of you are perfect and together – definitely not perfect.

At this point, the bride and groom were looking at me with some concern. “What are you doing, Amy?” their eyes asked me. “Are you ruining this important day for us?” Keep in mind. I knew their backstory. It included trauma, abuse, addiction. Hard stuff. So I took a deep breath and kept talking.

You aren’t perfect. Thanks be to God. It’s no fun being perfect and I’ve heard it’s even less fun being married to someone who is perfect.

I’ve been wondering. If you two aren’t the perfect couple, if you weren’t destined by fate to be together, then how did you end up with one another? Who is to blame for the two of you being together? There are many potential culprits – some of them right here in this room today.

I think I know who is to blame. I think I know who bears the full responsibility for this pairing.

God...

Only God would think that this was a good idea... But then that's kind of what God does – God takes our imperfect parts – our broken places – and turns them into something good and holy and strong. That is what God does. That is what God has been doing with the two of you – as individuals, as a couple, as a family – mending what has been broken, drawing out strengths and gifts, healing, saving, challenging, connecting, sustaining.

Of course, God doesn’t get all the credit. There is a consensus among your friends, you two are the most resilient and courageous people we have ever known. You’ve had to be...

There are so many things that you two already know – you know that life can be hard – that we sometimes are given more than we can bear – that relationships are hard, hard, hard work.

There are so many things that you two already know – that we cannot get thru this life without the love and support of our friends, that we are powerless without the love of God, that joy and hope come to those who wait, that all things are possible with God.

Can you guess what these two chose as the scripture reading for their wedding? It wasn't 1 Corinthians 13 – no "love is patient" for them. No 1st John – God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

They chose Romans 8, the passage that Karen read a minute ago. They chose perhaps the boldest, strongest affirmation of faith ever written down. This passage gets read all of the time at funerals and memorial services. But weddings?

More from my wedding homily.

Paul asks a bold question: Who will separate us from the love of God? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? We could add to that list – Will disappointment or busyness, or cynicism or ___ fill in the blank... can any of these things separate you from the love of God?

Paul's answer was an emphatic, loud "NO" It is the most positive negative I can imagine – no, none of these things can separate us from the love of God.

These words from Romans and the promise they speak of – this is powerful stuff.

My suggestion to the two of you is to take these verses and keep them close... Carry them around balled in your fist, put them in your pocket, leave them by your bed at night, set them on your dashboard when you drive. Make some extra sets – give them away to any person who will listen. Here take these words – take this promise – hold fast to this promise – it can be believed. "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Will that promise sustain you in your life together and get you through all the challenges that life will bring you?

I don't know – this I do know. And you know it too. Whatever life brings, God will be with you... Your life together rests in God's hands. It is just that simple. God will be with you. Always.

That was my wedding homily. It's the only wedding homily I've ever done or heard shaped around this morning's text. It was such a good choice for them. It's always a good choice. There are some parts of the Bible that – let's be honest – sound and feel dated. Relevant to people who lived a long time ago but they don't have much to say to us. Not this passage. This passage is always relevant.

I want to take a deeper dive into the text. Paul begins by asking the question.

What are we to say about these things?

I've always seen that question as an invitation to apply this text to our current circumstance – our current situation. Yeah, what are we to say about COVID-19 pandemic? What are we to say about the death of George Floyd? What are we to say about climate change? What are we to say about the epidemic of loneliness that

predated the pandemic? What are we to say about these things? What can we say with confidence? What can we say that feels true?

Paul continues, asking another question:

If God is for us, who is against us?

I think Paul intends that to be a rhetorical question. We don't always hear it that way.

Who is against us?

Gosh where do I start?

- People who don't wear masks
- People who think the virus is a hoax
- People who don't acknowledge the reality of systemic racism
- People who don't see the world the way I do

It is tempting to spend a lot of time clarifying who is against us.

It's meant to be a rhetorical question because Paul is in a hurry to get to the big promise of the text. To talk about the big picture. And the picture doesn't get any bigger than this.

Nothing can separate us from God's love.

Paul gives some examples of that which cannot separate us – famine, persecution, hardship, peril, death – his list covers a lot of ground.

This faith claim made in Romans 8, it gets renegotiated for every generation, every circumstance. It's that big. So, we people living on planet earth in the summer of 2020, what are we going to add to the list of what doesn't separate us from God's love?

- Pandemic
- Unemployment
- The threat of eviction
- Systemic racism
- Loneliness and isolation: what some people call skin hunger or touch deprivation. The lack of physical proximity and physical touch. It's a real thing.

None of these things separate us from God's love. I want to be clear. This big claim about God's love doesn't mean that we don't address these things I just mentioned. This claim made in Romans is not an invitation to be passive and leave it all up to God. It's a reminder that – as we face the hardest things, the biggest challenges – as individuals, as communities, as the human family – God's love will never let us go.

I want to return to the couple that I married that day. Here is where I tell you that the two of them are still married. That this text held them together. This is where I tell you that they are happily married. They are not. It didn't work out. They had some good years but they ended up getting a divorce.

Not everything works out. Marriages end. Treatment doesn't work. Pandemics ravage. Racism persists.

And, you know what? That doesn't make this affirmation any less true. In fact it makes it more pressing. More important. More essential. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. We hold on to that truth not so we can escape the world and its challenges but so that we can engage the world and maybe even transform it, knowing that nothing can separate us – all of us – from God's love.

I'm going to close the sermon with the same suggestion I gave that couple that day. I offer these words to newly baptized Eddie Lenzo. I offer this suggestion to all of us.

Take these verses and keep them close... Carry them around balled in your fist, put them in your pocket, leave them by your bed at night, set them on your dashboard when you drive. Make some extra sets – give them away to any person who will listen. Here take these words – take this promise – hold fast to this promise – it can be believed, it can be trusted. “Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Amen.