

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor thing 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.” (Rom 8:38-39)

What can I say after this? Sometimes Paul just preaches himself. Nothing, nothing, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. If that’s all we take away from today then it is enough. It is enough to trust that God loves us and that nothing we do we get in the way of that love. We can run, we can hide, we can deny the hold that was put on us in baptism when we were marked as Christ’s own forever. But God’s love is still there.

Now that doesn’t mean we don’t try to escape God. It can feel uncomfortable to know that God is there all the time. Psalm 139, our psalm from last week, talked about how God searches us out, and knows us inside and out, all of our thoughts and actions. God has seen it all, all the commandments broken, the injustice in our families, social networks, political systems, and work places. God has seen us, God knows us. Sometimes when we fall into sin, we are ashamed and try to reject God. Sometimes the bad things in life can overwhelm us and we can try to reject God. Sometimes we become successful and thinking we can do it all ourselves, we can try to ignore God. It doesn’t matter. God is there and we will know it when we open our hearts to the relationship that God has offered. That’s the redemption that was won for us in Christ’s victory over sin and death. That’s why it’s an offer that God never rescinds but, but we do have to accept the offer to receive its benefits!

We will understand more about how God shows up if we work our way backwards through today’s passage and we hear “If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? (Rom 31b-32)

“will he not also give us everything else?” It does not matter the circumstances. God offers us the knowledge and comfort of his presence. Those early disciples who didn’t know what to say when confronted by their persecutors but trusted that words would be given to them by the Holy Spirit, or today when we turn to God in the middle of despair and we know that God is there. We see it most often in God’s abundance. In the Food Pantry we receive food from many sources, sometimes at the last minute even when times are challenging as they have been during the pandemic. On Wednesday Judy Celauro received a \$750 grant from COAD, Patchogue’s disaster relief coalition. Such donations help the Food Pantry to buy food that they wouldn’t otherwise receive.

There are times though in the face of significant challenge and tragedy, like the pandemic that has turned our lives upside down, when we wonder how God makes sense of

the world. Paul assures us that “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” That’s a tricky one because it can lead us to think that all things happen for a reason – they don’t. It is what we make of what happens that gives purpose to our lives. All things that happen are not good but that is not to deny the potential for good to come out of painful circumstances. Look at the consequence of the pandemic. We can’t gather together in the church for everyone’s safety. Yet nobody wants to be permanently exiled from church. We miss the sacraments, we miss being together. We miss being in our beautiful church building where we can pray and “join our voices the Angels and Archangels and all the company of heaven”... So yes we have lost a lot but who would have expected that Zoom would enable us to gather for worship and for meetings, and even for fellowship. Technology has given us a way to connect that will continue to expand even after we are able to gather safely in church. That is what redemption is all about but it doesn’t mean that our world doesn’t get a little crazy at first.

In his parables Jesus gives us a clue that the kingdom of heaven is different that we might have imagined.

When Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a mustard seed he must have startled his listeners. The mustard plant was considered an invasive shrub with no redeeming value to humans but it grows and grows and provides birds a place to make their nest. The kingdom of heaven comes from a small seed – it is not a conquering empire, and that mustard bush is not a majestic cedar, symbol of royalty. It is a small seed that grows and grows and provides respite for creatures in God’s creation. Likewise yeast was considered a sign of corruption and decay, but mixed with flour, and 3 measures of flour was about 50 lbs of flour would make bread for more than 100 people. Paradox is at play in the kingdom. The kingdom of heaven is a hidden treasure and when we see it, it moves us to action, like the man who found it. We might wonder at this analogy. Is it saying that we should acquire our treasure by dishonest means? After all the man who found the treasure does not take it to the owner of the property instead he reburies it and goes and buys the field. We can give him points for honesty on that score but the premise may leave us confused. Nevertheless we do know that God chooses unlikely heroes – Jacob, for example, and all of us, for that matter. But the kingdom beckons and we do well to heed its call. Now the merchant, usually a less than honored profession in Jewish society, remember the prophets complaining about those who cheat their customers? But this fellow finds the pearl of great price and sells all he has to possess it. We know that’s not logical but if the kingdom is that pearl of great price we can’t hold back we have to give it our all. Lastly there is the matter of judgment, those good and bad fish caught in a dragnet, which still belongs to God. We are all in this together and the kingdom of heaven is not just for when we die.

You see what I'm saying – all things working together for good may not be in ways that we experience or understand and as always the timing is up to God therefore we are to hope and trust that indeed they will, “for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose”. (Rom 8:28b)

Ok, when it is next to impossible to see how things are working together for good, what are we to do?

Again Paul has the answer. “The Spirit will help 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.” (Rom 8:26) When we get stuck the Spirit is there to rescue us, even from ourselves. God really does know us too well. We are too weak by ourselves, we succumb to temptation; we do not do what we want to do, even when we know what is right, we cut off our noses to spite ourselves by turning away from God's love; God sends us his Son to save us from ourselves, and then sends the Holy Spirit to make sure that we can get on board and stay on board.

It should be so easy shouldn't it?

Nevertheless we are called to do the best we can. “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor thing 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.” (Rom 8:38-39)

Amen.