

August 11, 2019
The Myth of Separation
Annette Hill Briggs
Romans 8:31-39

³¹ What can we say about all this? If God is on our side, can anyone be against us? ³² God did not keep back his own Son, but he gave him for us. If God did this, won't he freely give us everything else? ³³ If God says his chosen ones are acceptable to him, can anyone bring charges against them? ³⁴ Or can anyone condemn them? No indeed! Christ died and was raised to life, and now he is at God's right side, speaking to him for us. ³⁵ Can anything separate us from the love of Christ? Can trouble, suffering, and hard times, or hunger and nakedness, or danger and death? ³⁶ It is exactly as the Scriptures say,

*"For you we face death
all day long.
We are like sheep
on their way
to be butchered."*

³⁷ In everything we have won more than a victory because of Christ who loves us. ³⁸ I am sure that nothing can separate us from God's love—not life or death, not angels or spirits, not the present or the future, ³⁹ and not powers above or powers below. Nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord! (Contemporary English Version)

*Reading Number Nineteen from *The Tao of Healing*: If all the scientists, analysts, and theorists disappeared today, not one part of truth would be lost. If all the judges, lawyers, priests and prosecutors disappeared, not one part of morality would be lost. If all the investors, speculators, and brokers disappeared, not one part of wealth would be lost. On the contrary, truth, love and abundance would be more easily received. Center yourself first in the Wholeness and all the parts will be yours.*

The truth cannot be separated like the yolk from the white. Every shred of truth holds all of it. In every human being there is the fullness of Christ. And what we conceive as difference is the conjecture of our own fear – our pride acting in reverse – bearing no resemblance to the faith we claim.

And yet we never stop, do we? We never stop de-centering ourselves. Moving ourselves around inside the expanse of the creation. Re-arranging our environments for the reasons people do. For convenience. Efficiency. Productivity. Those are the reasons we say out loud. Safety, as much as anything. We all want to live in the safest neighborhood we can afford. We'll sacrifice to get there. When we bought our first house, the realtor

told us we'd be happier if we bought a bit more than we could afford. *Salaries go up*, she said; *your house will stay the same size*.

We separate ourselves. It's what we do – put as much space as possible between ourselves and whatever makes us feel unsafe. We organize and categorize and classify and grade our lives and the lives of those around us, based on our respective fears. There aren't many people I actively avoid – fewer than a handful – but loads I don't go out of my way to see. *It's better for my mental health*, I say to myself. Maybe. Or maybe I'm just making up excuses to cover up some fear.

It's this reconciliation that is on Paul's heart and mind as chapter eight winds down – the reconciliation between what we claim to believe of God and the kind of people, the kind of believers, and the kind of church we choose to be.

Let's pray together: *Put us in the eyes-wide-open presence of our fears, O God. Set them side by side with your love for us so that we know we have a choice, each and every day, to live like your beloved children and your church. Amen.*

“*The most stunning rhetoric of the New Testament*” is Professor Luke Johnson's assessment of the last third of our text for today, Romans chapter eight. Johnson frames it as the opening argument by a defense attorney out to prove to a jury – the Roman church/us – that, believing as they so obviously do in the righteousness of God (also called *justice*, remember), they by definition also believe in the full inclusion of the Gentiles in church. Either Jews **AND** Gentiles have **ALL** been reconciled by God in Christ Jesus or the righteousness of God itself doesn't stand. The full case is made in chapters 9-11. The opening statement is here, framed in eight questions.

These eight questions are what I want to consider – more quickly than it sounds like – considering. Number one is the most rhetorical: *What shall we say about all this?* Like when a parent says, *what am I going to do with you?* The kid is about to find out. The next seven questions, plus three chapters, are what he has to say about this.

Numbers two and four are the same question, twice stated: *If God is on our side, can anyone else be against us? If God says his chosen ones are acceptable to him, can anyone else bring charges against them?* Anyone who's been in Sunday School a minute knows the Sunday School answer is supposed to be “No.” Anyone who's lived in this world fifteen years or so knows the answer so often turns out to be “Yes.” I've lived the better part of my life among people who said without hesitation that God loves everyone the same, but who live as if we don't take that idea seriously at all.

Full inclusion of all people is part and parcel of our faith. And yet, look around the room. How diverse are we, really? In experiences – yes. How about all the other qualifications of diverse? In race and all the connections therein, we're aren't more than four white paint chips apart. Socially, politically, economically, educationally, we end up

pretty much in the same neighborhood, the best neighborhood we can afford – for the school district and the property values, but for the unspoken as well: safety.

My husband grew up in West Memphis, Arkansas. If you know anything about East Chicago or East St. Louis you know everything you need to know about West Memphis. He was six when the police came to interview his family about yet another murder on their street. “What do you suppose was the motive, robbery?” asked the detective. And in his tiny six-year-old voice, my husband piped up, “Robbery? In this neighborhood?”

We don't call it segregation, for heaven's sakes, or privilege. We call it the same thing all parents everywhere call what they do: *the best we can with what we have for our kids* – never recognizing how we might have conflated the gospel of the world with that of the Christ. The gospel preached by the world is one of irresistible self-interest, one that anesthetizes our fears and blesses our stereotypes. And somehow, we missed the moment in which we chose that gospel instead of the gospel of Jesus.

Friends, we have no permission – biblical or otherwise – to play or defend this mad, mad game of human segregation, of separation, of irreconcilability and at the same time lay claim to the righteousness of God.

The third question is in verse 32. In King James it reads: *He that spareth not his own Son but delivered Him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?* I chose King Jimmy for saying best what we know deepest: that, having Christ Jesus, we already have everything. That, having Him, we have nothing else to ask for. We have a million other explanations, but at the end of the day, what if it is our fear of scarcity that drives our faith into segregation, separation and exclusion? Our confidence that if there is enough for everyone, there won't be enough for me?

Over and over in human history, the fear of scarcity has turned to policy and theology, to no good end. People always get hurt. As you know, I've made quite a mess of things in my grand plans to be at Pridefest this year. I didn't do my homework. I drove some of you crazy. I am considering it my chance to practice humility and your chance to practice kindness.

Another piece of that pie that I didn't know was a piece of it is this. In just a few weeks I'm leaving for a big vacation. I'll be gone a month. I had this great idea to invite some of my oldest Baptist clergy colleagues to supply preach for me while I'm gone. They are a married couple, recently retired from campus ministry. They excitedly agreed – for a week. Then they read our website. The same website that another group said isn't bold enough in support of LGBTQ+ people. My friends apologetically had to go back on their word. I want to take the high road. Outwardly I have. Inwardly – sigh. It is not easy for me – mostly because I still think I am right.

I am still pretty mad at the idea that gospel preachers have declined to preach the gospel to people they believe most need to hear the gospel. That would be you, by the way. They don't want to appear to agree with you by attending church with you. I'm wise to the lack of humility I am currently projecting. I am searching for the line between arrogance and Righteous Indignation.

At the same time – decline to preach the gospel, really? After what he's given us, who are we to withhold anything in our pockets from anyone else, the gospel most of all??? Do we own the air we breathe? Do we own the stars and moon? Do we own the gospel? The antidote to scarcity is radical generosity. Give yourself away and see how much self you still have left. Find out there is no end to what the Lord can do with a person or a church that has given up fear as a way of life.

Question five: *If God says his chosen are acceptable, who can bring charges against them?* Really, the same as questions #2 and #4 but pressing the point that God who created and initiated this way of being called *righteousness*, called *justice*, called *grace* – translated, remember, as *undeserved kindness* – God does not give it for us to hoard like candy, to use as bait for catching others. Do we understand, friends, this acceptance we have received from God is the only thing we have to pass on in God's name? Like Mattie says in *True Grit*, “*You must pay for everything in this world one way or another. There is nothing free except the grace of God. You cannot earn that or deserve it.*”

So much else we have, we treat like something God means us to have, never acknowledging how hard we've squinted at the scriptures to come up believing that. *Can you condemn them?* goes Question Number Six. *No, indeed*, comes back the answer. No indeed, knowing what you know of Christ. *No, indeed* is in fact the answer to questions two and three and four and five and six and seven. *Can anything separate us from the love of Christ?* Nope. For added drama, there is a list. Can trouble? No. Suffering? No. Hard times? No. Hunger? No. Poverty? No. Danger? No. Death? No. For many, poverty is harder to imagine than death. Still the answer is no.

It's hardly a complete list, but the point is still made: nothing human-made or inflicted can separate us from the love of Christ. Because the love of Christ is not an additive. It does not exist somewhere apart from our existence. It is here, now, within and among us, again as close and real as breath. Paul says, look at us; we are constantly about to be wiped out like sheep in a butcher's pen. Which sounds terrible, but only to people too attached to life as a sheep, people with no idea of the peace that follows the tiny peace available in a world that is not that different from a sheep pen some days.

The climax of the rhetoric Professor Johnson describes is here in verses 37-39. Those seven man-made dangers already listed are matched by seven cosmic ones – cosmic threats as useless as the first to separate us from the love of Christ. Not life or death, not

angels or spirits, not the present or the future, and not powers above or powers below. Nothing. No thing. Not one thing – on earth or in heaven.

Aren't you the slightest bit tempted to imagine it? To believe it? That in Christ we have all we need. And so does everyone else. That no one we meet ever needs **us**. They may need us to share what we have. But they don't need **US**. Any more than we need them. Because in us all the fullness of Christ already dwelleth. (I'm going to start speaking in King James.)

But together – only together – shall the great oneness of Christ be plain to us. And only when it is plain to us shall we ever be through with the fear-driven, soul-sucking, heartbreaking myth of human separateness. We just won't need it anymore.

If all the scientists, analysts, and theorists disappeared today, not one part of truth would be lost. If all the judges, lawyers, priests and prosecutors disappeared, not one part of morality would be lost. If all the investors, speculators, and brokers disappeared, not one part of wealth would be lost. On the contrary, truth, love and abundance would be more easily received.

Let us center ourselves first in the Wholeness of Christ and we shall surely, here and now, have a taste of heaven. Would you pray with me?