

The Rev. Anne Turner
Proper 12, Year A (Romans 8:26-39)
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Grace Episcopal Church, Amherst, MA

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, not 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.

I have loved these words from the first time I heard them. I have read them in dark places. I have clung to them at funerals. Perhaps you have grabbed on to them, too. Paul's confidence has always felt to me like a lifeline.

But this week I find that it feels like something else. Not a lifeline. More like a fetter. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ . . . Really, Paul? Are you sure about that? Truth is, I don't know that I always am.

I think of a friend of mine who experienced a profound conversion almost three years ago, whose sense of God has suddenly vanished like smoke. He writes this: "I seem to have a switch in my brain that controls whether I believe in God, and it gets flicked on and off at the most random times . . . it was turned off last night for no particular reason that I can discern." Nothing terrible, nothing dramatic, just sudden and incomprehensible exile.

Or I think of the seminary classmate who found himself with cancer in his second year. Surrounded by a very earnest Christian community eager to try out their pastoral skills, he heard a lot about how he was going to find Christ in his suffering. It didn't happen that way. He confessed to us all, at the end of the semester, that he had just found suffering, nothing more.

I think of the man in the nursing home who shrugged when I offered him communion, because he wasn't sure if it would make a difference. I think of the woman who gave up and left halfway through the Sunday service because she had grown bored of talking to God with no answer. I think of any number of tired, indifferent smiles from people who are running out of energy to pretend that they feel God's presence with them all the time. I have a long list of disappointments. Perhaps you do, too.

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Paul answers rather quickly. I don't know that I can. I see so much that makes me question. Paul's confidence is not always our confidence, is it?

I wonder what it was like for the early church in Rome, receiving this letter from a man they'd heard of but never met. They patiently follow him along for eight chapters of dense, theological rhetoric, and then they come to this sweeping conclusion. I think of them, gathered together and listening to these words being read, some of them with glad and certain smiles but others trading uncomfortable glances across the room. This was a community where all were persecuted and some caved under the pressure. Certainty may be haven a bulwark to some, sure. But it was a millstone to others. "Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ . . ." Really, Paul? Are you sure about that?

Was there any good news for those questioning hearts in what Paul wrote? Is there any good news for us, still, us who doubt and hope and wonder?

To find out, I think we have to back up a little from Paul's sweeping confidence how he got there. Sure, he's convinced. But why? What gives this man such assurance?

All throughout the letter to the Romans, Paul has made some pretty significant claims about how God works in relationship to us humans. He's been talking, for chapters on end, about the saving work of Jesus. And here he starts talking about the Spirit, claiming that "that very Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." It's a very poetic image, of course, but it's also a very specific and telling one, especially in light of all that's gone before. God is operating beyond our ordinary human faculties. The divine presence is lodged not in our head and its rational choices or even in our passions but is instead somewhere in our guts. It's somewhere around the place where we draw our very breath from. Whatever else Paul tells us about God, he wants to make sure we understand that God is working in us at a level outside our control.

From that first image Paul then goes to all this very messy stuff about predestination. And maybe we start to zone out a little at all those abstract and technical words, but he's actually making a related point. Salvation is in God's hands, he insists—not remotely in ours. God's methods work outside of our human range, outside of our abilities and outside of our time. God has a kind of power we can barely imagine—a power used for our good but totally independent of us.

What Paul's getting at is often called, in theological terms, God's sovereignty. It's a strange word, *sovereignty*, especially for those of us who aren't governed by a sovereign in this world and are, frankly, rather used to creating our own egalitarian and democratic authority. And yet the knowledge that there is someone who has total power watching over us—that's Paul's great joy.

In fact, it's the occasion for some rhetorical fireworks. This is it, this is the thing that lights the fuse for his faith: this knowledge that our well-being does not rest on our own choices. We do not have to manufacture our own salvation. God does that. Our good ends depend only on God's total power coupled with God's total love.

Does that knowledge light the fuse for you, too? Paul seems to imply that it should, but here's where I take issue with him. Sure, some days, it all works for me and I am convinced and convincing, on fire with the best of them. But other days, something in me is just soggy. I hear the words and I know what they mean, but I can't go dancing in the streets.

But I am starting to realize that the fireworks, the dance, the supreme confidence—it's really nice when that happens. *But confidence is not the main point.* Certainty is not the heart of what we heard today. I don't have to share Paul's confidence. What I need to share is his faith. They're different things, aren't they? Confidence is a feeling, a passing joy of the moment. But faith is so much more. Faith understands that God is greater than my passing understanding of the divine presence. Faith lets me place my trust in God's love and power on the days when it feels pointless to do so. Faith lets me act like I am right next to Jesus when I feel separated by an ocean.

And faith reminds me of something else. Faith reminds me of the best news of all here: that my attitude towards God doesn't make a smidge of difference in God's attitude towards me. I might claim to be making a choice for God, but I am, in fact, already chosen. I might claim to be seeking God, but I am, in fact, being sought. We all are.

What then are we to say about these things? A good question, indeed. Paul seems to suggest that we should imitate his confidence, because he thinks that confidence will lead to obedience and discipleship. I'm not sure it's always works that way. If we look at the witness of scripture, the witness of our church, there are certainly times of grand proclamation. But there are also countless stories of people who were loved more than they could know or understand or speak about. Some who have been saved shouted it from the rooftops. And others sat with that reality, and pondered it, and wondered, and questioned, and

poked at it a few times to make sure it was as real as it felt. We stand well within our Christian tradition whichever course we are able to take.

What to say about these things: the best words that I can find are to tell you a story from a few years ago, when I was studying as a chaplain in a children's hospital. I had the chance to witness open heart surgery. I decked myself out in scrubs and a gown and a surgical mask and stood right by the patient's head. I'm not a blood person. I looked away as the first incisions were made; I only turned back when I knew the girl's chest was safely spread open.

And then I saw it: her heart, laying there, beating. I knew what it would look like, of course; I knew what it was doing. I'd taken biology and studied anatomy and had been prepared for what to expect. But the intellectual understanding of cardiology paled next to this jerking, powerful, amazing *thing* beneath me. I kept putting my hand to my own chest, feeling my heart jumping, too.

A while later I left the room and changed into ordinary clothes and went about my ordinary day. I kept checking my pulse and swinging back and forth between awe and disbelief. Did I really have that strange power inside of me, too? It can't be here, inside me, can it? Really? But it was. And frankly, my internal debate didn't really matter. My heart didn't care one bit about my intellectual or emotional assent to its workings. That beat kept steady all day long, its own faint sighs too deep for words.

God keeps time within us, too, when we are paying attention and when we are not, when we want it and when we couldn't care less. Some rare and precious days ordinary flesh gets pulled back and we can see the heart of God beating in us. Most days, we have nothing to go on but anatomy books and hope. And yet still God is constant.

Are we convinced? Paul wants us to be, but that's not really the question that matters. Are we loved? Are we saved? Does God inhabit us, our hearts and our bones? Our replies may be glad or they may be defiant or they may be hesitant. But God's reply to those same questions never wavers. It is always yes, and yes, and yes.