

“Wild Hope”

Romans 8: 26-39

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/A, July 24, 2011

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When I am particularly stressed it shows up in my dreams. One of those reoccurring dreams features me driving around a steep curve on a mountain road. I have made this kind of trip several times in my life. On a mission trip to Montana in my first church, I traveled the Bear Tooth Pass into Yellowstone National Park in a 15 passenger van filled with a dozen excited high school students who couldn't understand why Rev. Dolan was sobbing in the front seat (thankfully I was not driving!) Most recently, I took that famous ride to the top of Mt. Washington to visit the observatory with much the same reaction. Mountains, vehicles and I are not a pleasant combination. In my dream I somehow fail to negotiate the curve and plunge over the guardrail. Thankfully I wake up in a cold sweat before I hit the bottom. There is also the dream in which I am much younger, perhaps only three or four years old. I am holding tightly to my mother's hand in a crowded store and out of the corner of my eye, something catches my attention. In a split second I am lost and no one can find me. I panic as I realize my mother; the person that is supposed to keep me safe is gone. Our dreams often speak to us of our deepest emotions, including the worries and fears we can not articulate while we are awake.

The fear of abandonment is very real for many people. That is what my lost in a crowd dream is about; the fear that I will become separated from the very thing that gives me life and security. For some people the feeling of abandonment is more than a worry that haunts their dreams. Perhaps you have experienced the death of a parent at a young age. Some of you may have been raised by people other than your parents because they were unable to do so. People who have been adopted often wrestle with a feeling of abandonment their whole life. Even if they had a wonderful upbringing in an adoptive family, for many, there is an insatiable longing to meet the person who gave them up.

For others, abandonment is not literal but emotional. If you grew up in a family where one or both of your parents were emotionally unavailable, you may feel as though you were left to go it alone. I have a friend who is now happily married with a family of her own. When we talk about what we learned from our families of origin she playfully says “I was raised by a pack of wolves.” While other people in her life stepped in to provide the love and care her parents could not, there is still no substitute for the love of caring parents. One may overcome such a past, but the feelings of insecurity and abandonment are still very real.

The need to belong, to feel connected, to feel safe, to be joined to and accepted by someone who loves us, is one of the deepest needs of our species. When we do not experience this in our childhood we go looking for it in other relationships. Many of us are on a life long quest to find this kind of security in God. That is perhaps why I love this passage from Paul's letter to the Romans. It touches on this deep need and indeed, primal fear. Writing to the church in Rome, Paul continues to describe what life as followers of Christ is like. He has already declared that there is no condemnation for

those who are in Christ and that we are not only God's children, but heirs of this promised kingdom. These were encouraging words to a community facing considerable challenges. Paul proclaims that because God is for us, no one can stand against us. In other words, there is nothing anyone can claim about us that could deprive us of this relationship, this love, even this promised inheritance. Nor can anything in all creation diminish our status as God's beloved.

If God is for us, who then could be against us? The answer of course, is no one. If God is for us, why do we act as if this is new news instead of Good News? Paul assures us that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. He does not promise to eliminate hardships. God can not prevent loved ones from dying, or stop an accident from happening, or spare us from a potentially fatal diagnosis. God can not keep us from experiencing such things, but when they happen we will have the power to overcome them in and through our relationship with God. In all these things, Paul proclaims, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us!

This passage is often read at a funeral service. They are comforting words to one who may be unsure of what lies beyond this realm for that loved one who has just died. I believe they are equally comforting to those of us still here to carry on. Imagine what it would be like to repeat these words as a mantra as you began each day. "Nothing can ever separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus." That does not mean you get a free pass to behave badly because God will love you anyway. It does not mean that you should keep silent in the face of injustice because God will love you anyway. It does not mean that I can treat another person disrespectfully because God will love me anyway. It simply means that if we do any of these things and perhaps much more, God will never stop loving us.

It is sad how easily we deny our love to family or friends because they don't measure up to some standard we hold for them. How often have we heard of children afraid to come out to their families as gay because they worry their families will abandon them? How often have we heard of teenagers taking their own lives because they think they don't measure up or their peers have tormented them into believing they don't deserve to live? It doesn't have to be this way. As followers of Christ, the foundation of all our relationships is love, that unconditional, I will never leave you no matter what you do, kind of love. If nothing can separate us from God's love, then nothing should separate us from one another's love either. Paul encourages us to create communities marked by this unconditional love and acceptance. "No matter who you are or where you are on your journey, you are welcome here!" This is not just a slogan that looks good on a church's website; but the basis of our faith.

There are no conditions to this love; nothing means nothing. Paul says it clearly, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor 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." (Vs. 38-39) Not matter what nightmares we may dream or experience. No matter where we may go or what we may do or what may be done to us; nothing can separate us from God.

What would it be like to live every day from this place of blessed assurance? I know this is not easy to do. Into every relationship we carry so much emotional and spiritual baggage. Thankfully, God is patient with us. God keeps speaking to us the words we need to hear, “you are my beloved, and nothing can separate you from my love.” This love is like a deep well that never fails to quench our thirst. It is like the sweetest fruit that satisfies our deepest hunger. This love is like a security blanket that you tuck safely away in your cedar chest, the one you took with you until your mom insisted you were too old to carry it anymore. One of my favorite children’s stories is about Owen, the little mouse who carried a security blanket until he was getting ready to go to school. In attempts to get him to give up his security blanket, his parents tried hiding it and dipping a corner in vinegar to make it unappealing. One day his mom took the blanket and cut it into pieces so Owen could discreetly carry a bit of his blanket with him. The Ladies Aid has made a version of Owen’s blanket for anyone who wishes to have it. They are called pocket prayer shawls. They are small enough to fit in your purse and come with a prayer. They are a tangible reminder that nothing can separate us from God’s love and care. It is my hope that when we face our own personal struggles, this is the mantra that will see us through, “nothing can ever separate you from my love.” Nothing. May it be so! Amen