

Reflection on the Scripture: Romans 8:26-39

[[The video of the reflection.](#).]

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 (Romans 8:38-39). Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God. And if we were still meeting face to face, I might have set you up in groups and asked you to make your own lists. And we would have come up with some good ones. Not racing traffic on Route 3, nor sticky masks, nor cancelled bell ringing, nor cooking three meals a day (and don't get used to it!), nor abundant zucchini, nor people who can't figure out how to go the correct direction in Market Basket, nothing will separate us from the love of God.

Except that the petty annoyances aren't what worry us about being separated from the love of God. When we are worried about that separation, we are sitting in a dark place. That our drinking or our temper or our sharp tongue will leave us alone in this world, rejected by everyone, including God. That our need for love will have pushed everyone away from us including God. That our compulsion to name the racism and sexism we see around us every day will push everyone away, including God. That our destruction of the environment will leave God no sacred place to stand when God comes to this world. Because we have lost someone we loved, and our love for them was what always helped us find a path to God's love. When we are worried about being separated from God's love, it's the fears we are barely willing to acknowledge to ourselves, let alone show in a small group and laugh about.

When we are worried about being separated from God's love, we look at our struggles to re-open schools in the fall, helpless because the kids who are falling behind the most are the ones who were the furthest behind to begin with. We look at who are essential workers, and most of them are barely making minimum wage. And the ones making way more than minimum wage are people like doctors and nurses and their getting beyond exhaustion because we're acting as if they are machines, not human beings, who can work shift after shift after shift in the ICU without an end in sight. We know that the restaurants and hospitality and airline industries are all getting crushed, but there's just no way to take the vacation we were planning and even if we could get past the worry about the virus, there's the money we're not sure we can spend. But as Christians, aren't we supposed to be doing more than praying about all those things? Doesn't that separate us from the love of God?

In March of 2000, I realized that if I didn't find a way of getting exercise that worked for me, that made me happy, I was in trouble. But gyms with their

beautiful people in spandex, their boastful people slamming weights around, their personal trainers giving me either powder puff workouts because they were afraid I'd have a heart attack right then, or workouts so tough I could never complete them, gyms were places of shame and dread and self-loathing. So I asked everyone, and I mean everyone, for advice. Dental hygienist, grocery store bagger, my friends, my parents' friends, librarians, people in line at the bank. Someone referred me to Paul's gym and I loved it in a way I had never loved any exercise program before. I've been going faithfully for 20 years. I've become a born-again athlete. And if you think born-again Christians can be annoying ...

But for years, I would drive to Paul's gym and I would sit in the parking lot and I would decide whether I was going in or not. I had packed my workout clothes, I had built it into my schedule, I had paid for it, *I had driven to the gym – I was in the actual parking lot* and still I was spending mental, emotional, spiritual energy on deciding whether to go in. I love that gym. Honestly, it's my model for a healthy church. Never once had I gotten there and not gone in. And still I spent some of my life force multiple times a week deciding whether to go in or not.

Until the day when I just snapped. I wasn't going to decide any more. I was going to go in. Maybe I wouldn't even warm up. Maybe I wouldn't even change out of my street clothes. But this dithering while sitting in the car was over. I wasn't going to decide anymore. I was just going in.

For Paul, the Bible guy, not the gym guy, I think there is a moment like that, when he decides to follow Jesus. Nothing changes. He still has to deal with all the challenges of life, all the sin, all the obligations under God's Law,¹ all the taxes and requirements under Roman law. He still needs to buy bread and cheese in the market. Nothing changes.

But everything changes. Because he can let go of so much doubt and worry. Living in this world is messy and hard and there are entire sectors of society dedicated to making it that way, the ones who bring the *hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword* (Romans 8:35). Paul quotes Psalm 44 *For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered* (Romans 8:36). And we follow Jesus Christ whose death underlined how messy and hard and horrible this world is.

For Paul, the decision to follow Jesus, means leaving all the grinding doubt behind. We are no longer alone in this struggle; it's no longer up to us on our own. *The Spirit helps us in our weakness* (Romans 8:26); *that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words* (8:26); *the Spirit intercedes* (8:27); *If*

¹ Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1949), 308-309.

God is for us, who is against us? (8:31) Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies (8:33).

Once Paul makes that decision to follow Jesus, the noise in his head drops significantly. Life is just as messy and hard and horrible, but it touches him less, it immobilizes him less. When you look at the list of things which cannot separate us from the love of God, they're all huge things, things well beyond any one person's control:² *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* (Romans 8:38-39). If nothing that big can separate us from God's love, how can our doubts, our concerns separate us? They can't.

It's so easy to see what we take on when we follow Jesus. And it's a lot. We aren't allowed to not see the injustice of the world anymore. We are obligated to care for the widows and orphans and strangers among us, because we were once slaves in Egypt (Deuteronomy 24:17-18). We take on Jesus' suffering and death. But we are also given relief from the hard, horrible mess of this world. When nothing can separate you from the love of God, you gain a freedom that nothing, not one thing can reduce. In committing more fully to the reality that nothing can separate you from God, you may find that your earthly reality is far easier to navigate and to change.

² Beverly Gaventa, "Proper 12: Romans 8:26-39" in *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year A*, ed. Walter Brueggemann et al. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 422.