

Chris Murphy

Sept. 1, 2022

Scripture: Romans 8: 26-39

Sermon Title: The Unconditional Love of God

Prayer...

Introduction:

In September, we are beginning a sermon series about our identity and mission as Newberg First Presbyterian Church. This morning I will explore our Presbyterian identity, next Sunday our mission partner Caroline Kurtz will highlight our church's commitment to world mission by talking about her mission work in the Maji district of Ethiopia. Then on Sept. 18<sup>th</sup>, I will preach on our mission statement, specifically with a focus on the words grace, hope, and love. And finally Mary Kalesse will preach on Sept. 25<sup>th</sup> on who we are in terms of our identity in Christ.

This is going to be a fun month!

So...let us begin with some thoughts about our church's Presbyterian identity. When I was growing up, I had exposure to a few different experiences of church, but by the time I was six years old I knew my family was Presbyterian. My parents moved our family to Spokane, WA when I was six and they became professors at Whitworth College, a Presbyterian school. We soon began attending Whitworth Presbyterian Church right next to the college. And as many of you know, I would later attend Whitworth College myself and then after college I attended Bethany Presbyterian in Seattle, where my dad at that time was the pastor. As I look back on my story, I realize from the age of 6 until now I have had a foot in the Presbyterian Church.

By the time I was ready to attend seminary, I knew that I wanted to be a Presbyterian pastor. I chose Fuller Seminary because it was both an ecumenical seminary and because a lot of my Presbyterian pastor friends had graduated from Fuller. Long story short, my studies at Fuller would eventually open the door for me to work on the staff at Fuller as

the Director of Presbyterian ministries. In December, I will celebrate 14 years as an ordained Presbyterian pastor. As you can see, being Presbyterian is part of my DNA.

The funny things to share with you is that although I am Presbyterian in my heritage and now in my current call as a pastor, I am also very eclectic in my appreciation for the diversity of the Christian church. While keeping one foot in the Presbyterian church, I have also spent much of my life exploring the ministries and ideas of other denominations and Christian traditions beyond my Presbyterian roots. I very much love the fact that this community- our little church actually has a lot of denominational and non-denominational diversity. In fact to prove my point, I want to ask you a few questions. With a show of hands, how many of you grew up for most of your youth or adult life outside of a Presbyterian church context? What were some of those church denominational backgrounds. How many of you grew up primarily Presbyterian?

The key thing to remember is that all of our spiritual stories are sacred. Diversity is beautiful. Our church is becoming more denominationally diverse all the time and that is exciting. We are seeking to be a more blended congregation. We blend both modern and traditional worship music. Our liturgy is both formal and informal. The theology we preach here is influenced by the Presbyterian reformed faith tradition, but we also draw from wisdom of other Christian theology, always rooted in our love of Scripture. All of this diversity is by design because we are a both/ and rather than an either/or church. We embrace both modern and traditional. We affirm our Presbyterian roots as a church and we embrace the denominational and non-denominational diversity of our congregation.

As we celebrate the breadth of our church traditions, today I want to highlight what I love most about my Presbyterian faith. I love that we believe so deeply in the unconditional love of God. Growing up the most popular Scripture that I remember reading in our Presbyterian

worship services was Romans 8, our text today. It was popular because it spoke of God's sovereign love for God's creation. Do you see the theme of God's love in our passage today?

It begins by showing that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with sighs that are too deep for words. Then Paul writes about how all things work together for good for those that love God. The beauty of that verse is that God brings life even out of suffering. That verse is not saying that God ordains or determines everything that happens in our lives, but instead that God can be present for us in the hardest times and still bring new life out of the brokenness of our experiences, which to me is hopeful.

Paul also talks about how God calls and predestines people to be conformed to the image of Jesus and that we are invited into the family of God to love and serve God. Jesus like the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with prayer because we are part of God's family and loved by God.

Then we come to maybe the most beautiful of Paul's reflections on Christ's love.

"Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.' (As an aside this verse is referencing Psalm 118:6- With the Lord on my side I do not fear. What can mortals do to me?)

No in all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 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."

Wow! Is this really true? Nothing can separate us from God's love. If this is true, then though sometimes we may feel alone, we are never alone. This means that even when great hardship comes, even when

there is loss and suffering, the final word is love and God's eternal presence of love. Love wins.

You may say, well what does Paul know about suffering? How can he know that nothing separates us from God's love? Well, he knows a lot. He suffered great hardship as a missionary for Jesus. He was persecuted for his faith. He was beaten, thrown in prison, ridiculed. He was shipwrecked, even bitten by a poisonous snake- thankfully healed from it, but that must not have been fun. Paul ultimately was killed in Rome because of his faith in Jesus. Yet, Paul has the audacity and more importantly the joy to say that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This Scripture feels very Presbyterian to me, although I am aware that all Christians appreciate this passage. What makes it feel Presbyterian is the emphasis on God's ability to love us and care for us even in our weakness. Presbyterians historically and theologically have highlighted the greatness and power of God and the weakness and vulnerability of

humanity. The good part of that emphasis is that Presbyterians have reminded the church to trust God even in the midst of the mystery of human suffering and the sorrow of human sin. We have emphasized God's goodness, love, grace, and power even when humanity and creation groan with pain and brokenness. This is a strength of our Presbyterian heritage. And by the way, all of you here at this church are getting a taste of Presbyterian faith every week. All of you are becoming a little bit Presbyterian.

To be clear, my goal and our church's goal is not to make anyone Presbyterian, although you are welcome to call yourself Presbyterian if you wish. No, our goal is to encourage you to follow Jesus with your life and if you feel so called, to call yourself a Christian who wishes to demonstrate through your words and actions the unconditional love of God in Christ Jesus for the world. Hallelujah.

Friends, nothing can separate from the Love of God in Christ Jesus. You are not alone. Christ is with you. We are with you. God is love and God



will never forsake you. Jesus and the Holy Spirit intercede for you. Jesus died for you on the cross and proved by his compassion in this life and in his death and resurrection that the final word is love. Love wins. God is love and we are love because we are children of God anointed by him to share this amazing love with a world in need. Can I hear an AMEN?

People have said that Presbyterians are the frozen chosen. I was talking to one of our church members recently about that unfortunate though sometimes accurate description of this denomination. This member of our church said to me that she is hopeful because our church is proving that we Presbyterians can thaw out. Here at Newberg First Presbyterian Church, we are not the frozen chosen. No, we are followers of Jesus, full of light and love. Full of the power of the Holy Spirit, wide awake to the mystery and beauty of God. Friends, nothing can separate from the Love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. AMEN and AMEN.