

July 27, 2008

“Nothing Can Separate Us”

Romans 8:31-39

Intro to scripture: What connects us to God? What bridges that chasm between us and God? What link crosses the human/divine gap?

We seem to have some sense that something called sin separates us from God. That when we sin we somehow fall short of what God intends for our lives, and this disconnects us, puts up a wall, and we separate ourselves off from God. Then, we often decide that by working hard enough, we can rebuild our connection back into God’s presence. But these bridges that we create to God tend to collapse, fail, crumble. Like the Tower of Babel, our human-made attempts too often fall short of reconnecting us to God and we become frustrated. Which brings us to today’s lesson from Paul in Romans. Across the inadequacy of our attempts came someone who could link us back to God – once and for all. Link human and divine and never ever let us go. We didn’t design this bridge, we didn’t finance this bridge, we didn’t build this bridge, and we don’t even deserve this bridge. But it’s here.

The early Christians in Paul’s Rome had every reason to believe there was no way to overcome the fears they felt, no way beyond the persecutions they faced, no way to overcome the evil done to them. Paul reminds them that yes, there is a connection – a link – a bridge of faith that will not fail – ever!

SERMON:

Last night I returned from our annual family reunion with Fred’s kids, their spouses and the grands – all together in a lodge between Lookout and Rainelle, West Virginia, in the mountains for a weekend of fun, hiking, games, the little ones running around with their cousins; the siblings re-connecting, sharing meals that we all pitched in to cook, even a Christmas gift exchange among the grandchildren. Such fun.

Just 15 miles from this lodge is the world’s longest steel arch bridge, over the New River gorge in Fayetteville, WV. This view never fails to awe me. 3,030 feet long, its arch extends 1,700 feet. It is crossed by 17,000 vehicles per day. On October 18, they will have their annual Bridge Day when 200,000 people will walk across the Bridge to gaze at fall colors, watch base jumpers parachute off the bridge, dropping into the New River gorge 876 feet below. Watch rappellers descend like caterpillars on their ropes beneath the bridge, and eat food offered by 200 vendors.

A similar event is held at other magnificent bridges in the world: the Mackinaw Bridge, the Golden Gate Bridge, and the biggest one in Japan, 4 times the length of the Brooklyn Bridge, stretching 12,828 feet. Bridges capture the imagination as architectural wonders because they connect one place to another, places that seemed so hard to connect with a

bridge now become possible – even easy. The commute across the New River gorge in WV went from 45 minutes to 45 seconds!

There is that well known scene in a previous Indiana Jones movie, *The Last Crusade*, that stands so vividly in my mind when I think of our fascination with getting from one place to another across a seemingly impossible gap. Harrison Ford has to cross a chasm from danger to safety by walking – leaping, actually – on to a bridge that he cannot see. He actually *believes* the bridge is there. All evidence points to its existence, but he cannot see it. And so in the height of drama, he leaps out into thin air ---- and as he lands, the bridge beneath him becomes visible, and he races across it to safety. A bridge that is there – even when we can't see it.

How do I connect my human self with the divine? Age after age, people have wondered how best to connect with that which seems beyond them: their God, creator, the center of being, a higher power. Throughout history, humans often felt they needed to reach out to a God who had to be appeased, that they needed to offer great sacrifices so God would not send flood or wind, or destroy crops. They have felt that they needed to work hard so God would be pleased, to pray better so we could win his favor, to burn incense, and bring blessings upon us by the God who loves to smell nice scents. If we could just find that bridge, people thought, to connect us.

And each time people seem surprised when their efforts fall short, because our link with God isn't one we can design or finance or build ourselves. The bridge between fear and hope, suffering and glory, evil and good is our faith in Jesus Christ. Faith is the bridge that withstands the storms. Says Paul, *If God is for us – who can be against us?*

Get real, Paul, lots of stuff is against us. He even lists some of them: hardships, distress, persecution, famine, sword, peril. How about some other things that seem to be against us – like economic pressures? How about the guy who wants our job -- can he be against us? What about health issues working against us? Anxiety, addictions, despair, global warming, terrorism, housing costs, interest rates, crime rate, pain, road rage ---- shall I go on? Indeed what can Paul mean that *If God is for us who can be against us?* How long is your list? Where is that faith bridge across the chasm of these worries and fears that we can leap onto and rush across to safety?

Paul emphatically declares, NO! These things *cannot* separate us from God! *I am absolutely convinced of it*, he says! We have become victors! Conquerors! I am absolutely convinced that nothing – nothing - can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

If God is for us – who can prevail against us? We have become more than conquerors through him who loved us.

I can't tell you the last time I pulled my Greek New Testament off my bookshelf. It's embarrassing to admit that, but it's true. I had to blow the dust off it. But something I was reading in a magazine I subscribe to called *Homiletics* [p.32, 7/05] drove me to look it up for myself to see if I could still read it. It's the phrase in our lesson today where Paul says [in v. 37], *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us*. The phrase *more than conquerors* is one word in Greek, *hupernikomen* – hyper – more than; nikomen - conquerors – like the word Nike, the shoe – we are victors! We are hyper-Nikes, more than victors, through him who proved his love for us, and we cannot be separated. We cannot be overcome! *If God is for us, who can be against us - indeed!*

Do not fear, says Jesus, do not. Terrorism, warfare, bankruptcy, job loss, death - we are invited to walk – to leap onto that bridge that will not, cannot collapse, even when battered. We are urged by Paul to let go of our grip on these things, or more accurately not to grip onto these things that grip us, but instead to get a grip on God [Max Lucado]. For I have become absolutely convinced that nothing – no-thing, no-one, can separate us.

What is keeping you up at night? *If God is for us -- who can be against us*. Who or what could possibly prevail against us? Nothing! If God is for us, the bridge is strong enough, long enough, and high enough. Nothing can ever prevail or separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So where will you connect with God? The bridge is there – where will you step out on it? Examples abound in scripture.

Moses connected in a burning bush. He stepped out in faith when he heard the voice calling him to free his people.

Hannah connected with God when she begged for a child and stepped out in faith to dedicate that child to God.

Isaiah connected when he had a vision in the Temple of a six-winged seraph and hot coals on his lips; and he responded, *Here I am – send me*.

Elijah connected with God in the cleft of a rock as the earthquake, wind and fire passed by and he heard the still small voice of God telling him to trust and go forth.

Bartimaeus, though blind, connected with God as he sat by the side of the road, heard the Lord walking by and called out to be healed.

The woman who bled for 7 years touched Jesus' robe in a crowd and connected with God. The thief on the cross connected with God as he breathed his last.

King Nebuchadnezzar connected with God as he watched Daniel in the fiery furnace. As people sat on a hillside and were fed loaves and fishes, they connected with God.

Where do you connect with God, stepping out onto that bridge? David watching sheep, Jonah in the belly of a whale...

When we feel unconnected, separated from our God-bridge, we remember Paul's emphatic words. God is ever-present in the agony, the persecution, the sword, because nothing can separate us – not cancer, not fire, not anything! Not only do these things fail to separate us, they actually can connect us even better. I hear this all the time from you. Suffering actually can bring you closer to God, you have told me. Which reminds me of a story I told at a funeral of an old time doctor who made house calls, and was calling on his friend who was dying of cancer. The patient said, "Doc, I'm afraid of dying. I don't know what's next." And the kindly doctor said to his friend, "You know when I came here to see you, I brought my dog with me. He's patiently waiting for me outside your door. He has no idea what's in this room, as he's never been in here. But he waits with the assurance that I am in here – and that I will come to take him home."

For I have become absolutely convinced, says Paul, that we are more than conquerors – and that nothing – can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen