

“Inseparable Love”

Romans 8. 26–39

The Rev. Hal Chorprenning, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 24 July 2005

I'm getting really tired of picking up the newspaper in the morning and reading something that really makes me shudder – whether it's a series of bombs in Egypt, another bombing in London or vague American threats to bomb Mecca or layoffs at H-P and Kodak or a hate-mongering group that claims to be acting in Christ's name. I'm fed up with a nation that has a history of high ideals falling into a mindset that doesn't call us – individually and collectively – to be our best selves, not just for ourselves, but for the rest of the world, and for our children who will inherit the beauty and the mess we leave them on this planet.

Does it seem to you as if we're beginning to live in a binary world: us and them, right and wrong, red and blue, Christian and Muslim, secular and religious? Do you ever wonder if God sees us that way? The damned and the righteous, the Jews and the Buddhists? Somehow, I don't think God has a binary view of humanity.

A lot of days when I read the paper it seems like the “powers and principalities” are getting the upper hand and that “all things *don't* quite work together for good.” And I think sometimes it's hard for people who haven't lived through a war or a depression or six or eight decades to understand that our present era is but a small sliver of time.

The present situation in our country leaves me wanting and wondering: *wanting* to have a national vision that calls us to our best selves and *wondering* how we can get there.

Listen to these words, written by an eminent theologian: “Who, in recent years, and indeed in our whole century, does not feel the irresistible forces which determine our historical and personal destiny? They drive nations and individuals into insoluble conflicts, internal and external; into arrogance and insanity, into revolt and despair, into inhumanity and self-destruction. Each of us is involved in these conflicts and driven to a greater or lesser degree by these forces. The personal life of each of us is in some way determined by them. No security is guaranteed to anyone; no house, no work, no friend, no family, no country anywhere in the world is safe, no plans are certain of fulfillment, all hopes are threatened. This is not a new state of things in human history. But what is new is that during a few years of comparative safety, we had forgotten that this is the true state of things. Now we see it again everywhere because suddenly we are living in its midst in every part of the earth.”¹

Paul Tillich wrote those words in 50 years ago, and they are no less true today. He might just as well have been talking about Al-Queda and the War in Iraq and the economic dislocation of the American worker.

B' B' B'

In his first inaugural address, Abraham Lincoln said, “We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

We, all of us, must be touched by “the better angels of our nature.” We need to be the messengers of who live out Paul's powerful words: “In all these things we are *more than conquerors* through him who loved us.” So, Christians don't need to fight Muslims;

¹ Paul Tillich, *The New Being*. (New York: Chas. Scribner's Son, 1955), ch. 7: Principalities and Powers.

Americans don't need to fight Iraqis; Democrats don't need to fight Republicans – because we have already *superceded victory*. We are *already more* than conquerors – because we are all the recipients of God's unconditional love. We don't have to reassure ourselves that we're right by proving someone else is wrong. The argument is already over. We just need to know on a deep, visceral level that we are God's beloved.

But, if you're like me, God's love can sometimes be problematic. How can we believe that God loves us when we have such trouble getting our heads around the idea that God not only accepts us, but loves us – no matter what? Most of us are used to a culture where we need to earn what we get. Sometimes we receive gifts, but there are often strings attached. So, perhaps it's a bit counterintuitive for us to receive an unencumbered gift that we did nothing to receive. Unlike the cheesy TV ads, in the case of God's love, there *really* is “no obligation.”

In my experience, progressive Protestants have a harder time than most in accepting the free gift of God's love, even in times of crisis. Especially in times of emotional distress, we need to try and open ourselves to God. We are a people in bondage, and the only true, enduring release from our captivity is to say, “Yes!” to God's inseparable love. It's going to continue regardless of how we respond, but our lives will change if we're able to say, “Yes!”

Sometimes, we need to stop fighting those old voices inside ourselves: the ones that say, “You're not worth loving,” or “I don't love others or God well enough, so how could they love me?” We can turn the old tapes off and just *be*, just let Paul's words speak their deep truth to the depths of our being. Let's be quiet together for a few moments, and then I'll reread you Paul's words. [silence] “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.” [silence]

Paul Tillich had seen a lot in his lifetime that would have convinced him that the powers were winning the day. He had been a chaplain in the German Army in the First World War, and in 1933, after being on the Nazi enemies list, had come to the United States to teach at Union Seminary at the invitation of Reinhold Niebuhr. (Both Tillich and Niebuhr were UCC, by the way.)

Those words of Paul the apostle that we just meditated on “are among the most powerful ever written,” writes Tillich. “Their sound is able to grasp human souls in desperate situations. In my own experience they have proved to be stronger than the sound of exploding shells, of weeping at open graves, of the sighs of the sick, of the moaning of the dying. They are stronger than the self-accusation of those who are in despair about themselves and they prevail over the permanent whisper of anxiety in the depth our being. What is it that makes these words so powerful? ... Several times in his letters he sums up the meaning of Christianity in the message that Christ has conquered these powers which govern the world, but nowhere does he affirm it as triumphantly as in the beautiful and powerful words to the Romans.”²

B' B' B'

I know that sometimes we ... I ... make things too complicated. And sometimes there is a relatively simple message that is just too deep for all the words around it. These words from Paul are among them. We need to be able to approach them as children do. Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”³ And so, I'd like to share a story with you. We gave this book to

² *ibid.*

³ Mt. 10.15

Cameron on his first Christmas, and it's called *Guess How Much I Love You*. So, for people like me who sometimes make simple things overly complex, this is for us. (*We just need to let ourselves be the Little Nutbrown Hare.*)

"Little Nutbrown Hare, who was going to bed, held on tight to Big Nutbrown Hare's very long ears.

He wanted to be sure that Big Nutbrown Hare was listening. 'Guess how much I love you, he said. 'Oh, I don't think I could guess that,' said Big Nutbrown hare.

'This much,' said Little Nutbrown Hare, stretching out his arms as wide as they could go.

Big Nutbrown Hare had even longer arms. 'But I love **you** this much,' he said. Hmm, that is a lot, thought Little Nutbrown Hare.

'I love you as high as I can reach,' said Little Nutbrown Hare.

'I love you as high as **I** can reach,' said Big Nutbrown Hare.

That is very high, though Little Nutbrown Hare. I wish I had arms like that.

Then Little Nutbrown Hare had a good idea. He tumbled upside down and reached up the tree trunk with his feet.

'I love you all the way up to my toes!' he said.

'And I love you all the way up to your toes,' said Big Nutbrown Hare, swinging him up over his head.

'I love you as high as I can hop!' laughed Little Nutbrown Hare, bouncing up and down.

'But I love you as high as **I** can hop,' smiled Big Nutbrown Hare – and he hopped so high that his ears touched the branches above.

That's good hopping, thought Little Nutbrown hare. I wish I could hop like that.

'I love you all the way down the lane as far as the river' cried Little Nutbrown Hare.

'I love you across the river and over the hills,' said Big Nutbrown Hare.

That's very far, thought Little Nutbrown Hare. He was almost too sleepy to think anymore. Then he looked beyond the thorn bushes, out into the big dark night. Nothing could be farther than the sky.

'I love you right up to the MOON,' he said, and closed his eyes. 'Oh, that's far,' said Big Nutbrown Hare. 'That is very, very far.'

Big Nutbrown Hare settled Little Nutbrown Hare into this bed of leaves. He leaned over and kissed him good night.

Then he lay down close by and whispered with a smile, 'I love you right up to the moon – and back.'⁴

May you continue to love and to accept God's inseparable love – right up to the moon and back.

Amen.

⁴ *Guess How Much I Love You* by Sam McBratney (Cambridge, Mass.: Candlewick, 1994).