

I invite you to open your bibles this morning, to today's scripture text, which can be found in the book of Romans, the 8th Chapter, verse 31-39. Which can be found on page ___ in your pew bibles. We continue in our Advent series "The Traditions of Christmas." Today's scripture reveals a lesson of the Love that nothing can separate us from.

Ro 8:31-39

31 What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all — how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? 33 Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died — more than that, who was raised to life — is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? 36 As it is written:

"For your sake we face death all day long;

we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

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

38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

NIV

In Christianity, wreaths are used to observe the Advent season. The time of celebration of the saving mission of Christ, his promised coming, and his manifestation as our Savior. This is the season when we prepare ourselves to receive God's gift of Jesus. The Advent wreath is part of our long-standing tradition. However, the actual origins are uncertain. There is evidence of pre-Christian Germanic peoples using wreaths with lit candles during the cold and dark December days as a sign of hope in the future warm and extended-sunlight days of Spring. In Scandinavia during Winter, lighted candles were placed around a wheel, and prayers were offered to the god of light to turn “the wheel of the earth” back toward the sun to lengthen the days and restore warmth.

By the Middle Ages, the Christians adapted this tradition and used Advent wreaths as part of their spiritual preparation for Christmas. After all, Christ is “the Light that came into the world” to dispel the darkness of sin and to radiate the truth and love of God (John 3:19-21)

The symbolism of the Advent wreath is beautiful. The wreath is made of various evergreens, signifying continuous life. Even these evergreens have a traditional meaning which can be adapted to our faith: The laurel signifies victory over persecution and suffering; pine, holly, and yew, immortality; and cedar, strength and healing. Holly also has a special Christian symbolism: The prickly leaves remind us of the crown of thorns, and one English legend tells of how the cross was made of holly. The circle of the wreath, which has no beginning or end, symbolizes the eternity of God, the immortality of the soul, and the everlasting life found in Christ. Any pine cones, nuts, or seedpods used to decorate the wreath also symbolize life and resurrection.

Altogether, the wreath of evergreens depicts the immortality of our soul and the new, everlasting life promised to us through Christ, the eternal Word of the Father, who entered our world becoming true man and who was victorious over sin and death through His own passion, death, and resurrection.

The four candles represent the four weeks of Advent. A tradition is that each week represents one thousand years, to sum to the 4,000 years from Adam and Eve until the Birth of the Savior. Three candles are purple and one is rose. The purple candles in particular symbolize the prayer, penance, and preparatory sacrifices and good works undertaken at this time. The rose candle is lit on the third Sunday, Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday of joy and rejoicing, because the faithful have arrived at the midpoint of Advent, when their preparation is now half over and they are close to Christmas. The progressive lighting of the candles symbolizes the expectation and hope surrounding our Lord's first coming into the world and the anticipation of His second coming to judge the living and the dead.

The light again signifies Christ, the Light of the world. The white candle placed in the middle of the wreath, which represents Christ and is lit on Christmas Eve.

So as we ponder on these enlightening facts about the wreath, let's take a close look at today's scripture, one of the most lyrical passages the Apostle Paul ever wrote. One that reveals the amazing Love that God has for us, an unending Love as symbolized in the continuous circle of the wreath. A Love that is so great, a love that reveals the glory of God. As it is demonstrated in His redemptive gift of Jesus, His only Son, for our salvation.

In verse 32 there is a wonderful hint which should stand out to us all. Paul says in effect: "God for us did not spare his own Son; surely that is the final guarantee that he loves us enough to supply all our needs." The words Paul uses of God are the very words God used of Abraham when Abraham proved his utter love of God, and his loyalty by being willing to sacrifice his son Isaac at God's command. God said to Abraham: "You have not withheld your son, your only son, from me. (Gen 22:12)

Paul seems to say "Think of the greatest human example in the world of a man's loyalty to God: God's loyalty to you is like that. God's love for you is like that." Just as Abraham was so loyal to God that he was prepared to sacrifice his dearest possession, God is so loyal to us that he is prepared to sacrifice his only Son for us. Surely, we can trust a loyalty, a love like that, for anything. The logic that flows from this is irresistible. If God has already given us the greatest gift, is there any lesser gift he will not give? If he has already paid the highest price, will he hesitate to pay any lower price. If he has gone to such lengths to procure our salvation, will he ever let us go?

What then, shall we say to these things? The question we need to ask ourselves is what are these things? If you still have your bibles open you can take a look back a couple of verses to Gods sovereignty in Romans 8:29-30

29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

In these two verses we have five terms that are written, that have taken place in the past that's having results today. Foreknew, predestined, called, justified, and glorified. This is one of the strongest passages in the new testament on the eternal security of the believer. For every million people who are foreknown and predestined by God, every one of that million will be called, justified, and glorified. Not one will be missing.

Foreknew, predestined, called, justified, and glorified. Do you notice all of these are written in past tense? You see, in God's mind it's already done. God isn't bound by time, he is the alpha and the omega, he is the beginning and the end, he is the author and the finisher. In God's mind, it's done. In God's mind he is looking at a perfect finished product, who looks like Jesus. That's why he doesn't have to worry about what's going to happen with us, he already knows.

This word foreknew, as we see here, means "know already, know beforehand, chosen from the beginning, chosen before." This same word is used in Rom 11:2 **2 God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew.** There has come to be in the present time a remnant, according to God's gracious choice. This foreknew means fore-Loved, and in God's heart he fore-Loved the church.

Paul says to you, and to all believers of all time, you, you gentile believer are the chosen of God. You see, God loved you, back, even before you were born, God set his love upon you. Foreknew is a love word. God fore-loved you. His love is not based upon what you can do, it's based upon what he can do. He says through the Holy Spirit to us this morning, that God's love is greater than anything we can do. God's love is greater than any sin we can commit. God's love is greater than any obstacle that can hinder us from coming to Christ.

We already know this because the Bible tells us from cover to cover that God loves us, that God is for us. God has always been for us. We know this because we have all the letters in the Gospel.

God has acquitted us. No one can condemn us. If a person is acquitted by God, then they are saved from every other condemnation. Our belief is in a Christ who died and rose again and is alive for evermore. That being true, is there anything in this or in any other world that can separate us from our Risen Lord? Two great truths have been laid down in this scripture, God has acquitted us; therefore no one can condemn us. Christ is risen; therefore nothing can ever separate us from him.

So then, if God has acquitted us, who then can condemn us? The answer is that the Judge of all men is Jesus Christ. He is the one who has the right to condemn – but so far from condemning, he is at God’s right hand interceding for us, and therefore we are safe from being separated from God’s Love, we are safe from being separated from God’s grace, from his comfort, his favor, his blessings.

Paul is doing a very wonderful thing here in this scripture. He is saying four things about Jesus. He died. He rose again. He is at the right hand of God. He makes intercession there for us. The earliest Creed of the church, which is still the essence of all Christian creeds, goes like this; “He was crucified dead and buried; the third day he rose again from the dead; and sitteth at the right hand of God; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.” Three items in Paul’s statement and in the early creed are the same, that Jesus died, rose again, and is at the right hand of God. But the fourth is different.

In the creed the fourth is that Jesus will come to be the judge of the quick and the dead. In Romans, from Paul, the fourth is that Jesus is at God's right hand to plead our case.

It's as if Paul said, "You think of Jesus as the Judge who is there to condemn; and well he might for he has won the right. But you are wrong; he is not there to be our prosecuting counsel but to be the advocate to plead our case. With a tremendous leap of thought Paul has seen Christ, not as the Judge but as the lover of souls of men.

Paul goes on with a poet's fervor and a lover's rapture to sing of how nothing can separate us from the love of God in our Risen Lord. Is there anyone or anything that can banish the justified from the Love of Christ? No affliction, no hardship, no peril can separate us. The challenges in our day, the obstacles in our path, the disasters of the world do not separate us from Christ; they bring us closer yet. Neither life nor death can separate us from Christ. In life we live with Christ; in death we die with him; and because we die with him, we also rise with him. Death, so far from being a separation, is only a step into his nearer presence; not the end but "the pearly gate on the skyline" leading to the presence of Jesus Christ.

Instead of separating us from Christ's love, These things only succeed in drawing us close to Him. We are not only conquerors, but more than conquerors. It is not simply that we triumph over these formidable forces, but that in doing so we bring glory to God, blessings to others, and good to ourselves. We make slaves out of our enemies and stepping stones out of our roadblocks.

But all of this is not through our own strength, but only through Him who loved us. Only the power of Christ can bring sweetness out of bitterness, strength out of weakness, triumph out of tragedy, and blessings out of heartbreak.

The apostle has not finished his search. He ransacks the universe for something that might conceivably separate us from God's love, then dismisses the possibilities one by one –

Angels nor principalities, supernatural in power and knowledge;

Powers, whether human tyrants or angelic adversaries;

Things present, crashing in upon us;

Things to come, arousing fearful forebodings;

Height nor depth, those things that are in the realm of dimensions or space, including occult forces. Then to make sure that he is not missing anything, Paul adds;

Nor any other created thing.

The outcome of Paul's search is that he can find nothing that can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Here is a vision to take away all loneliness and all fear. Paul is saying: "you can think of every terrifying thing that this or any other world can produce. Not one of them is able to separate the Christian from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ, Lord of every terror and Master of every world." Of what then shall we be afraid?