

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom, and open our hearts and minds that we might know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hungry, and hurting, and sometimes even dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

This week is the second Sunday of this three Sunday series that we are calling “Nothing Can Separate Us.” It is a series based upon the Epistle readings from the Revised Common Lectionary for these weeks which is found in the text of Paul’s letter to the Romans as found in Chapter 8 of that letter. The title of the series comes from the text toward the end of Chapter 8 in verses 38 and 39, “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, NRSV).”

Yet, here we are. We continue in the midst of a pandemic that has kept us out of our Sanctuary here at McFarland UMC for slightly more than 4 months now. While it is true that *nothing* can separate us from God in Christ, a virus, a contagion that we cannot see but one that can potentially cause great harm has kept us separated from one another. We’ve hunkered down in our homes. We’ve limited our trips. We’ve worn our masks and washed our hands... at least I hope that we have... I know that I have and my family has because I, for one, fall into the “high risk” category if I were to contract this disease... and let’s face it, each one of us here at McFarland is a walking example of pre-existing conditions. I also know people who have contracted this disease and it is not a pleasant experience from what they tell me. I’m lucky though, in that I don’t personally

know anyone who has died from COVID-19... but I know people who DO know people who have died from COVID-19 complications.

We hear the biblical text and we hold tight to the thought that “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus,” but we still doubt. We still question the thought based upon what we are experiencing now. It is certainly a challenge. But that challenge is one of the reasons why I chose to follow this series because it points us toward hope. It helps us “make the best of a bad situation” as Dick Feller sang back in 1974.

This series is giving us an opportunity to dive deep into Romans 8. Last week, we focused on the opening, verses 1-11, and focused on the thought of “setting our mind” on the things that Christ taught us. In other words, we grow closer to God (and each other) when our mind is focused on God’s priorities and God’s concerns. Those concerns are the care of widows and orphans, having concern for the poor and the outcast, and God’s requirement to love God and neighbor and to seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

This week, we focus on the thought that “creation waits,” in verse 19: “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.” But we come face to face with the idea in the opening of verse 12 that we are debtors. Far from the independent, “pull yourselves up by the bootstraps” independent ethic of American exceptionalism, we are reminded that life in Christ, following the mind of Christ, is more of a “we’re all in this together” manner of living. In the opening Paul says “So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.” If you remember from last week’s sermon, I mentioned that this whole “flesh/spirit” dynamic is not saying that our bodies are bad and our spirit is good - and that idea leads to a lot of misunderstanding. One way to interpret that opening is this, “if you live according to self, you will die; but if by the Spirit - the love of God and others -

you put to death the desires of the self in isolation, you will live.” Can you see the point that Paul is making? Can we live acknowledging our obligations? Can we live as debtors? Not to ourselves, but to God, to grace. We owe everything to love.

We owe it to those who have loved us when we weren't all that lovable. We owe it those who saw something in us when we couldn't see it in ourselves. We owe it to those who let us be wrong because that was the only way we would learn.

We are debtors to love. We are debtors to the Spirit who shaped us, who claimed us, who offers us a future with hope, and fulfillment, and joy. And we experienced the Spirit most vividly through those who walked beside us every step of the way. Those may have been our parents, our teachers, fellow students, or a combination of all of the above... and maybe more; maybe it was the church that nurtured us and told us that we were worthy of loving, that we were the beloved child of God that we are and it was an honor to guide and shape and love us.

We are ALL debtors. Oh, we may like to think that we are free and unfettered, not beholden to anyone, but that is a fallacy. We are bound together in human community. And the truth is that we are better that way. We are able to be glorified, to reach our full potential, to claim the gift of eternity, because of the debts that we accumulate, because of the relationships we are blessed to live in, and because of the community that we are becoming.

It is our privilege to suffer in service to those relationships. But it is not just the human relationships to which we are indebted. We are in relationship to all of creation. That's what Paul says. The whole creation, he writes. Groaning in labor pains, hurting because of what it wants to birth, what it wants to bring forth. Now, we'll say that he is talking metaphorically, about spiritual matters, not

physical ones. Or is he? It seems that Paul is hinting that our salvation is tied with the bondage and decay of creation. The fate of the world, the fate of the planet is woven into our fate, into our future and our hope.

Not only that, but all that God has made relies on us - not just us, but our better selves, our true selves, our lives as sons and daughters of God - which is a roundabout way of saying that we treat our world as though it were a part of God, and a part of us.

It is important distinction to make that creation is NOT God. We don't worship creation. No, we are followers of Jesus the Christ. We worship the Creator of all that we see and all that we are. Creation is not God. But we get a glimpse of the Creator when we comprehend the creation. We know the artist when we examine and protect the work of art. We commune with the author when we spend time in the writing. We get in tune with the composer when we immerse ourselves in the music.

God is the artist. God is the author. God is the composer. We are part of God's gift of creation. Our task is to be the caretakers of what God has created so that when God's kingdom is fully realized, everything will be made whole once again.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.