

Sermon Text for October 30, 2022

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Isaiah 55:11-13, Romans 8:35-39 ***“Nothing can separate us from God”***

Reformation Sunday kind of quietly snuck in here and so here we are celebrating it. On this Sunday we give thanks to those who came before us and broke down the institutional and theological lies that told us that our salvation depends on people in power and depends on what we do to please God. If we obey God then God will give us grace. If we disobey God then we will go to hell. The Reformation said no, no, nothing can separate us from God, not even our greatest enemy, ourselves. I bet if I took a poll here today most of us would say that how we live our lives impacts God's love for us. We think that there are certain conditions and benchmarks that have to be met before God will love us.

But Scripture tell us otherwise and this is what we celebrate on this Reformation Sunday. The most comforting NO in all of Scripture is the one that says can anything or anyone separate us from God. Scripture says NO. But we create conditional scenarios because that is how we go through life and that is how we live with our neighbor. If you love me I'll love you back. I will treat you as you treat me. Our lives reflect an injustice in our actions based upon a lie that God only loves us if we obey him and so as a result we should only love those who love us.

But Scripture and what God has done for us tells a completely different story. We find reflected in these pages and in our lives a God who is on our side no what matter. You should hear these words and stand firm against the lies of a conditional love: Even while we were yet sinners God sent his son to die for us. If God loved us conditionally then surely our sin would have caused him to change his mind. No, even while we were yet sinners God showed his love for us. This takes salvation completely out of our hands and puts it squarely on Jesus' shoulders. You will be judged based upon what Jesus has done for us not what we have done for God, how we have lived our lives.

In the reformation this concept took the power of salvation away from the church, it took it away from the pastors and put it squarely back on Jesus' shoulders where it belonged and where it had always been. Both of our Scriptures this morning tell the same story: God's Providence is so focused upon us that we can live in the greatest YES of all time which is His affirmation of his love for us. Let's read.

READ

So here is a question for you Philadelphia loving sports fans. Does God love the Phillies more than the Astros? I mean, they are doing so well, on the brink of winning the World Series unless I just jinxed them. Does their success translate into God loving them more than the Astros. The same could be said for the Eagles. Does their undefeated record mean that they are loved more by God than the teams that they have beaten so far, yes, as much as I hate to say it, even more than the Cowboys?

On Friday we had our first annual golf outing and we had two other churches represented in the ministerium, High View Church of God and Strasburg Mennonite, we didn't really compete, it was just for fun and fellowship. I played with some of the folks in our young adult Sunday School class and I have to admit, I hit a number of shots, not just one or two, but a handful where the ball ended up really close to the pin and it wasn't because I am good, but it was because I got a lucky bounce or things just kind of worked out. At one point I think I heard someone say I hate playing with a pastor, they have the big man on their side.

Our sense of God's hand at work in the world is almost always based upon a lie that what happens here on earth is dictated by the degree of love that God has for a person or a team or even a country. And so when bad things happen to good people we are left without an answer because it blows up our sense of justice and our understanding of how God works in this world. When something happens to people that we love at no fault of their own we wonder if it is a reflection of God's predilection, God's tendency and desire for sadism, or is it a reflection of that person's living, or is it something entirely different?

Our Scriptures today tell us something that flies in the face of favoritism for any one sort of individual or group upon this earth as reflected in what happens to them. Instead, what we find in Scripture is this truth that God is for us, good or bad. No matter who we are, God is for us. We hear the lies told us that God is only for those who obey and if you are separated from God or if you don't feel God's presence it has to be because God is not on your side. No our separation from God is completely one sided. It is us moving away from God. We separate ourselves from God, God never, I mean never will separate from us.

Turn to Isaiah 55 and we find ourselves in a time in the life of Israel where the people had fled from God. They had worshipped other gods, they had abandoned the laws and turned their backs on God. They were living in exile and were slaves to the Babylonians. But what we find in these verses is that God's Word will never come up short. God's promises will never be empty promises. God's Word will succeed. And what are God's promises to this people in slavery? Joy and peace will come flooding in. The mountains will sing and the trees will clap

their hands. The thorns in your life will turn into beautiful cypress trees and the briers into myrtles.

You can't wish that and it happens, only God can make these things take place in your life. Only God will transform your deserts into living streams. And he promises that it will happen, it will happen and not as a result of a quid pro quo where you obey and God then changes his mind. No, God will bring it about because God is on your side. It takes a lot to trust in the Yes of God when you are told your whole life that only you can control that yes. When you have been through a lot in life it is pretty natural to feel as if God is actually not on your side. On Friday evening I went to Our Table, you know the ministry that Walter and Kristin told us about last Sunday, and it was powerful.

We sat around tables and in that context at my table this discussion came up. I don't feel God is close to me, what do I have to do in order to have God close to me? How can we know that God is on our side? What do I have to do? The simple answer is nothing, God is on your side and there is nothing we can do to change that. Paul in Romans draws from his own experience to explain that concept. I said earlier that it is natural to wonder if God is for us or not when we are going through life's difficulties. Paul in vs.35 and following lists those things that he experienced that he lived through in his life.

In vs. 36 he even uses a Psalm where the Psalmist basically says to God wake up, come to my aid, where are you? Look at Psalm 44. Nobody in this room has experienced the trials that Paul experienced. Nobody has suffered in quite the same way that Paul did. If we were to rank sufferings in life on a scale of 1-10 Paul's would have been an 11. And yet he is still able to say in even while he is writing this in a prison: I am convinced that nothing is able to separate us from the love of God. If anyone would have felt separated, if anyone would have been justified with coming up with an angry approach to God. It would have been Paul. But he gives us the most comforting NO in all of Scripture, can anything separate us from God? No!

Do you today feel separated from God? Why is it? Have you experienced suffering, is that why? Or maybe your life has become so busy that God's presence has waned and here you are unsure of how to get it back. Listen to this promise in Scripture, God has not stepped away from you. But there is even better news. Not only has God not separated himself from you, but this Scripture even says that even if we run away from God, God will not stop loving us. God's love for us is not based upon our love or obedience to God. No matter what we do, or no matter what is done to us, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord even if we wanted.

I should bring this to a close, but I want to be clear that you know that when we say that we are really saying that God is ultimately the one who is over all things and it is not the church or the pastor who decided whether God loves you or not. Look at I Corinthians 3:22 and 15:24, then again Ephesians 1:21, and then again Colossians 1:16. On this Reformation Sunday it bares repeating that there is no power other than God's which can affect our final destiny. No dimension of our reality one can imagine has the power to frustrate God's care and love for us.

Even our limitless ability to rebel against God is overcome, and we are saved from our last and greatest enemy, ourselves. The basis of Christian confidence is the surety of grace. Personal misfortune is not the result of God's disfavor. It is normal to think that since God is in control that when sickness strikes it is a reflection of God's stance and attitude toward us. Paul says NO. The presence of suffering and affliction does not mean that God has abandoned us. Paul is living proof of that. Evil exists, we can't deny it but we can resist it.

This Reformation Sunday we are called to strip away the lies of you get what you deserve. No, we get a God who is for us and has done everything to draw us closer. The only one who has the power to condemn or accuse us is in fact the one who is protecting us. We have to abandon any thinking that when bad things happen then God has turned on us for some reason. God is for us.

We serve a God who has chosen to love us no matter what, now choose to serve him out of gratitude and not fear or hoping to get on his good side so that you can benefit. Even Jesus' suffering and death could not lead to the abandonment of God. In fact, it was precisely because of his suffering and death and resurrection that we have proof of God's indisputable love. Amen.