

Wesley United Methodist Church
July 26, 2020
Scripture: Romans 8:26-28, 38-39
No separation

We all know we are supposed to stay six feet away from other people and wear a mask if we are not able to do that. We call it social distancing and we know it is considered one of the most important ways to help stop the spread of Covid 19. There is an ad on TV that draws our attention to older persons who may be home alone and encourages us to make a phone call or to Face time or some how reach out. It reminds us that “social distancing is not social isolation.”

That is an important distinction and one that we need to pay attention to as we go about our day. It is easy to become socially isolated and along with that can go the feeling that no body really cares and that we are alone in facing whatever is happening. Many people are finding more safe opportunities to interact with other people and here in Rhode Island where the numbers are looking good, we are getting a little more brave in going out and going to places where we hope to be safe. For some that means a ride in a car is okay, but not leaving the car. For others it might mean meeting a friend for lunch in or outside of a restaurant where the tables are spread far apart. For others it might mean being back to work in their normal places of employment – although even then there are still accommodations to be made.

Despite all the commercials and articles that remind us that “we are in this together”, it is still easy to feel like you are facing it alone. Where do we turn when we feel that way?

I believe that today’s scripture is one of those really good places to turn. The reading from Paul’s letter to the believers in Rome is one that I generally read at funerals, which is often a time when some may feel really discouraged or alone. For some it feels like death is the end and at those times we ask where we find hope and help.

It is commonly believed that religion is supposed to relieve suffering and I believe that this is true, but it is not a vaccination to prevent suffering. We are hoping now for a Covid 19 vaccination that will allow us to go about our lives without being concerned or

afraid that we might catch Covid 19. But religion is not a vaccination that works the same way to prevent suffering. It does not create a magic bubble around us to prevent us from experiencing and feeling the difficulties, the sorrow and the problems of human life. Instead it gives us a way to help deal with those.

In fact, as followers of Jesus, we proclaim that God became human in Jesus so that Jesus could experience life the same ways that we do. He could laugh and have fun, and he could feel sorrow and cry. He could and did get angry and tired, hungry and thirsty, and when his body was hung on a cross, he died.

At a time when it seemed that everything was lost, God had one more trick up the proverbial sleeve. Jesus died, but after three days Jesus also rose from the dead, he became alive again and he walked among those who had known him to teach them and us about the greatest hope of all the hope and promise of eternal life.

Before he died, he tried to tell his followers about the Holy Spirit, the comforter who would come to them and walk with them when they most needed divine help. After he rose, the Holy Spirit came upon his followers at Pentecost and men and women who not long before had been afraid and hiding in a locked room were transformed into people who were brave enough to go out and face the most difficult challenges of life because they knew that they were not alone.

They knew with absolute certainty the words that Paul here proclaims to the Romans, that nothing, not death or life, not angels or rulers, not the present things or the fear of the future, not those with power, nothing can separate us from the love of God. That if God is for us, there is nothing or no one who can be against us and ultimately destroy us.

In the verses in between those that Chris read for us, we hear these words: “Who will separate us from Christ’s love? Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?” Paul proclaims a resounding “no” that none of these things can separate us from Christ’s love and then he goes on to say, that “in all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us.”

This text speaks to us in the middle of Covid 19. It speaks to us in the middle of chemotherapy. It speaks to us in the middle of divorce, or unemployment or any kind of

separation from those we love. It speaks to us no matter what is happening in life. It reminds us that no matter how difficult these things are, we are not alone and that Christ's love has not left us.

Sometimes we may feel as if God is far away from us. At those times, we might remember the story of a husband and wife who were riding in their car. The husband was driving and the wife was sitting in the passengers seat where she usually sat. She started reminiscing and said, "remember how much in love we were and how we couldn't stand to be away from each other. Remember how we used to sit next to each other in the car." The husband responded, "I didn't move."

I remember those days of sitting as close in the car to my boyfriend as I could. Do you? Maybe when we are feeling separated from God, we need to ask ourselves, "who moved?" Maybe we have. Maybe we have gotten to the point where we don't take time to pray and talk with God. Maybe we have allowed ourselves to become so busy that we do not make time to worship. Maybe we want to get closer to God but don't remember how.

At those times, and at any other time in our lives when we are feeling weak or separated or lost, we have another promise here. At those times, when we don't even know how or what to pray about, the Holy Spirit comes and intercedes for us, helps us to pray, all we need to do is sit in God's presence with an open heart and the Holy Spirit will pray for us or help us pray so that we can know God's will and so that we can have the strength and the courage to do God's will.

The story is told of a woman who came to God one day and said, "I am so tired and so confused, and so upset right now that I don't even know how to pray, or what to pray. So here's what I'm going to do. I'll simply recite the alphabet slowly 5 times, and you put the words together, because I don't know how." The Holy Spirit helps us when we don't know what to pray.

When life seems really hard, Paul's words are a light for our darkness. They remind us that we are not alone and have never been alone. One of the commentators I read this week said that this passage is like the Biblical version of the song, "We Shall Overcome". That led me down a rabbit hole where I listened to Peter Yarrow sing a

very moving version of this song with children. It also led me to several other recordings of it, and to several speeches including Martin Luther King Jr's speech by that name.

As much as the tears flowed while listening to some of these and as much as my soul was touched, it reminded me that there is one thing missing in this sentiment. It is true that we shall overcome whatever it is that is plaguing us, but I think the reality is that we need to recognize that in most cases we shall not overcome by ourselves.

Sheer human grit and determination are important but in many cases they are not enough. We need the strength and the guidance and the help of the one who intercedes for us when we don't know how to pray. We need to know the love of Christ that is with us every step of the way. We need to know that God is stronger than any other force in life and that together we can overcome with God and with each other.

One of the important ministries within our conference is JFON – Justice for our neighbors. It is a United Methodist ministry that provides legal services to immigrants seeking to adjust their status. In New England, JFON has five legal clinics where immigrants can connect with attorneys. The attorneys are paid but their services are provided to the clients for free.

This week I read a story of a man in Massachusetts who has been released after being held in custody for one year by the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement or ICE. Michael Langa, 56 came to the US from South Africa 20 years ago to work with children with autism and other challenges. He has a master's degree in psychology and another in religious studies.

In South Africa he participated in the work of Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He also worked for the African Constructive for the Resolution of Disputes. In the U.S., he used his experience and his language skills to work with some of the "lost boys" of Sudan through Lutheran Social Services. In 2009, he became one of the founding members of the Center for Non-Violent Solutions in Worcester, Massachusetts, where he continues to serve on the board.

I'm not going to get into the details of his story. You can find that on our conference website if you are interested.¹ Greg Turner and Michael Langa are both members of Carter Memorial UMC in Needham and although they didn't know each other well, they connected over a conversation about Turner's work with JFON and he

gave Langa his card. A few months later Michael Langa needed that card. He called Greg Turner to tell him that he had been detained by ICE.

Turner was willing to put in some serious time and energy to dig through records to get to the bottom of the situation. The case is not resolved yet and there are still legal channels to be followed but when released Langa said, "I want to tell the community how passionate, how compassionate you are. You don't know me. You don't have to do anything for me, but it shows the biblical connection between people during the difficult times. We are part of a community. Without the community it's hard for anybody to move to the next step."

"Asked what he is hoping for in the near future, Langa summed it up pretty succinctly: 'I want to operate like a normal human being. I just want to spend time with my children ... go back to normalcy, if I can call it that,' he said, adding he wants to focus on day-to-day things. 'I just want to go back to church and be a member.'"

Turner for his part hopes that others will be inspired to take up the important work of JFON.

This is one story of the way that people of faith can work with others to be the hands and feet of Christ, bringing hope to those who most need it and sharing Christ's love wherever we find ourselves in life. The Spirit comes to help us in our weakness. Nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our lord, not life nor death, not pandemics or unemployment, not disasters or injustice.

We may need to social distance, but God does not, and God's love can make a difference and overcome, in our lives and in the lives of others.

Let us pray:

God of love, when life seems overwhelming and we don't know how to pray, we are grateful that the Holy Spirit helps us. We are grateful that nothing can separate us from your love. Help us to be your hands and feet to help share that love with others so that they may know the hope we know. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.neumc.org/newsdetail/new-england-jfon-attorneys-facilitate-man-s-release-from-detention-14132665>