

## **Mel Caron's Sermon for July 26, 2020**

In this letter to the Romans, St. Paul is very clear. He says "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."

NOTHING can separate us from God's love – nothing we do or say, or think, or experience. God's love is endless - we're not powerful enough to stop it.

In a series we were studying in our Contemplative Group, Fr. Richard Rohr stated that "we are not punished FOR our sins" but, rather, "we are punish BY our sins."

We are the ones who separate ourselves from God's love. Jesus taught us in the Great Commandment that we should love our neighbor as we love ourselves. The problem for many of us is that we don't love ourselves enough to accept forgiveness for our mistakes.

We also learned in our Thursday Study from Dr. James Finley that we should view our sins as something that can teach us. By embracing our sins and learning from them we can change.

Think about what "eats" at you about your own actions. What have you said or done that makes you feel awful about yourself? Have you made a choice that hurt others deeply/yourself?

Have you accused someone of something and you later realized you were wrong? Have you destroyed a relationship with your words? Have you contributed to a wrongdoing either by your involvement or your failure to take action? Does it keep you from believing you are worth loving? Do you find yourself thinking "I'm not worthy of anyone's love, let alone God's love?"

*Nothing can separate us from the love of God.*

In my life the moment I feel most guilty for is that I wasn't with my daughter at the time of her death. You see, it was more important for me to kill my own pain with a drink, so I left the hospital, where she died a few hours later. The only way I could bear to face the choice that I had made that night was to continue to drown my guilt and pain in drinking. Eventually even that wasn't enough and I wanted to end my life. And I tried.

It didn't matter that I was married to a priest or that I had previously had a deep spiritual life – I thought I had failed and God couldn't possibly love me now. Through AA I came to

understand that I had turned from God's love because I punished myself. When I once again accepted the love that was there for me all along, I began to heal.

However, it's not just about "me or you." The scripture says "Nothing can separate US..."

The Great Commandment says "love our neighbors as we love ourselves."

This means that the love I receive is to be given away. We are all connected to God by this love. It flows from God into us and through each other.

A former leader in the KKK, Scott Shephard, shared recently on a documentary that some of his family members and his godfather were responsible for deadly acts against Blacks, including the great fire which killed children in a church. Scott became the head of the KKK in Tennessee. All the while he had his own secrets. A small voice in his head asked "Do you really believe in what you're doing? His other secret was that he had been raised by a Black woman whom he loved as his mother in Mississippi. He experienced guilt because he cut himself off from the love she had for him, and he felt shame for his actions. When he left the KKK he returned to her home. He stood at her door waiting, not knowing what her reaction would be. "She not only received me with open arms – she received me with an open heart," he said.

Sr. Helen Prejean ministers to inmates on death row and to the families of their victims. She tells the story of how she worked with one inmate. His brother and he were arrested for the murder of two teenage kids. His brother had been killed but this inmate's life had been spared. He told Sr. Helen that he was actually the one who had committed the murders. He had turned his life and heart back to Jesus and had sorrow for his actions. He wanted to do something for Sr. Helen for what she had meant to him. He wanted to give her a special cross to wear. The only way he could get the money to give to another inmate to make that cross for her, was to sell his plasma. She states that she wears a cross which a man gave his blood.

My brothers and sisters, God's love is neither red nor blue. God doesn't care about political parties. God is about love – pure love, transformative love. Jesus' whole message was teaching us to accept God's love and to share that love with others – no matter who they are. As St. Paul instructs us, no race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, religious beliefs stand in the way of God's love. Therefore, if they don't stand in God's way, they shouldn't stand in ours.

But that's not enough. What do we do with this love? Knowing that God loves every human person and everything in God's created order; I'm called to love in such a way that I don't allow anyone to be my enemy.

This is the role of the church – to call and remind us of who we are and what we're called to do. Loving isn't always easy. Following the traditional teachings of Jesus is radical. It's hard work, unless it's done out of a heart of love. Compassion was the driving force in Jesus' life.

My action is required. Perhaps I can become involved with the program Deacon Carl spoke of last week – *New Jersey Together*. This program gathers a group of churches and organizations around the state seeking to determine what the needs are in our communities in order to bring equality in our state.

Another option for my involvement could be the Episcopal Church's work toward ending the death penalty. You see, if I accept the love I'm given I'm called to accept that every one of God's people is given that same love.

Ghandi said that we should embody the change we seek. The Talmud states "It's not upon you to finish the task, but you're not absolved from trying."

This is what the reading from I Kings teaches us. As Solomon spends time with God. God asks what Solomon needs. Now, one would expect that Solomon would ask for riches, but he doesn't. He asks for Wisdom. Wisdom arises out of love.

Solomon had the humility to realize that he didn't have what he needed to love and lead his people in wisdom. That's the kind of humility we need to live out the radical call of Jesus. We need to spend time in prayer with God, seeking this heart of love that allows us to love others. The love that allows us to reach out to the marginalized and outcasts. The love that allows us to love our neighbors as ourselves because "Nothing Can Separate Us From the Love of God." Amen.