

Separation Anxiety

A Message for Morning Worship
On Summer's End Celebration Sunday
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC
August 26, 2018
Text: Romans 8:26-39

On this “end of summer” celebration Sunday where we bless school supplies and all those folks touched by the start of a new school year, it can be no surprise that separation anxiety is a topic of interest to at least some of us today. Anyone who has ever sent a child off to Kindergarten on the first day of school, or dropped someone off at the dorm for the first year of college, or helped a loved one move out of the area understands the concept of separation anxiety all too well. So does any teacher who has had to wipe away the tears of an anxious child or firmly guide an over-attached parent to the door on that first day of school.

Any teacher will tell you that the parents of Kindergarteners are more the issue on that first day than most of the children. So too the Resident Advisers in college dorms around the world spend more time easing parent fears about leaving a child alone than the child has about being left on their own. And who hasn't worried about a loved one making a move from a familiar space to an unfamiliar one, especially when that move means you won't be close at hand to help when things go haywire. This is life. This is what it means to care about someone, to feel responsible for someone, to love someone and be faced with the reality of letting

go, or sometimes, just loosening our grasp upon that person's place in our lives.

According to *Psychology Today*, separation anxiety is an excessive fear about being separated from one's home or attachment figure, like a mother or father. Originally thought of as only occurring in young children, it is now recognized as a condition that can occur anytime throughout the lifespan. It falls under the broader category of an "anxiety disorder" and treatment modalities do exist for individuals suffering from separation anxiety to an excessive, life crippling degree. Important as understanding the clinical side of this is, however, what really strikes me about separation anxiety is that when the separation is between two people, it is always a two-way street. Both people are affected by the separation even when one person's reaction may appear to be more profound. Sending that Kindergartener off to school or that college freshman off to the dorm the first time is surely traumatic for everyone.

In my personal experience, my kids were beyond ready to be on their own for their first days. I also remember quite vividly, that while I put on a brave front for them, I was a quivering mass of jello on the inside. But Peter and I knew we had to be confident *for* them or our anxiety would only make any they had worse and that would never do. So, I smiled and waved and drove off, bursting into tears the moment we turned the corner. How would

our little one cope with so many new people and new things? How would our big kid settling into a dorm room be able to tell a good friend from a bad influence? And, of course, the real truth behind it all – how can my babies possibly be old enough for this to be happening?? “What happened to my baby??” is the silent scream of every parent sending their children off alone to anything for the first time. And that’s as it should be.

Of course, when Paul talks about separation and the accompanying anxiety it creates he is not talking about the kind of separation anxiety we’re familiar with in the 21st century. How could he be? In Paul’s time, little ones didn’t leave home for school at all since schools as we think of them didn’t exist. If a boy was somehow given the chance to attend the Temple school as Paul was, it wouldn’t be until he had already been old enough to work independently at home or in the family business be that farming, fishing or whatever. And truthfully, no one would be overly anxious about this child heading out into the world alone because it meant one less mouth to feed. Parents loved their children in Paul’s day, of course, but not in the same obsessive way we see too often in our society these days.

We’re left to wonder, then, what kind of separation Paul is talking about. Of note is that before he even gets to the notion of separation Paul is talking about weakness, our weakness as people and as folks attempting to live life as followers of Jesus. “Likewise

the Spirit helps us in our weakness for we do not know how to pray as we ought,” Paul says at the beginning of the text we read this morning. We are so weak, so poorly prepared to be followers of Jesus, that we don’t even have the vocabulary to pray as we ought to be praying, Paul declares. But it’s okay because that’s where the Holy Spirit comes in, making sure our sighs and groans still find their way to God.

Then he goes on to reflect on why it is we might be praying in the first place. His next thought anticipates that we’re praying because we are worried or anxious or fearful about a situation we find ourselves in. He is acknowledging here two things: First is that God wants us to pray, to approach God with whatever is on our minds and hearts. Anything upsetting to us matters to God and God wants us to share it, even if all we have is sighs too deep for words. Second, Paul is telling us that even as we are praying about what worries us, frightens us most, we must trust from the outset that all things work together for those who love God. Oh, that is so good to hear, to know in our heart of hearts. But do we really understand what Paul is saying here? Maybe not. Paul is most definitely NOT saying that whatever happens to us is sent from God and is therefore good for us, a common misunderstanding of this text. Paul IS saying that no matter what happens, God’s will for us, God’s love for us prevails always. Paul is reminding us that God’s purpose for us and for our lives is

always much greater than any one moment in time, any one situation that occurs in our lives, no matter how awful, how overwhelming that event is *in the moment*. God is with us in and through everything that happens to us, Paul says, and therefore, we can endure, we will endure all the pain, the isolation and the fear life throws at us because we do not ever go through it alone. This is the great gift of God's love made real, made human, made accessible to us through the person of Jesus Christ. This is the reality of grace received and lived.

Does this mean we should not be anxious or sad or fearful when bad things happen? Is Paul saying these are occasions for singing alleluias to God for God's love? Of course not. Paul is saying quite the opposite in this beautiful description of what it means to be a religious person, a person who trusts that God and God's love is real and constant and life-changing when accepted in faith and trust. "What then are we to say about these things?" Paul begins. "If God is for us, who is against us?" If God is for us, who is against us? Now there is a rhetorical question that can be the foundation of a whole new way of living. If God is for *you* what can possibly interfere with God's plans for you? The answer is obvious, if hard to believe and accept. Nothing. If God is for you, nothing can interfere with God's plans, God's love for you. Nothing. Look at Jesus if you doubt this, Paul explains. God's love for Jesus carried him through and beyond death. God's love

for Jesus became his love for us. God's love for us is exactly the same as Jesus' love for us expressed through his death on the cross, a death that led to resurrection and new life.

At last Paul comes to *the* question of this text. "Who will separate us from the love of Christ Jesus?" Paul asks. Then he gives some examples of what could drive a wedge between Jesus and us, between God and us if we let it. "Hardship or distress, or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword?" Not even these things, the most awful things we can think of, not even these can separate us from God *unless we let them*. And, let's be honest, sometimes we are hurting so bad, we are so angry at some perceived injustice to us, we are so fearful of changes around us we don't want and can't understand – sometimes everything feels so bad that we feel separated from God and God's love. We feel lost and alone in our grief, our pain, our anger, our confusion. But we're not. Not now. Not ever.

"No," Paul exhorts us. "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." In all these bad, awful things and the heartbreak and anger they bring out in us, we are more than the sum total of every bad thing, every sad thing that ever happens to us. We are conquerors of all of them because God loves us, now in this moment however good or bad it is, and in all the moments to come after it, good or bad. We are conquerors of all those moments when we feel like giving up and giving in to

doubt and despair, sadness and grief, anger and fear. We are up to any challenge that comes our way because God loves us and will carry us through and beyond it all.

Now does it feel this way in those painful, fearful, angry, scary moments. NO! It feels awful. A heart-breaking loss is still heart-breaking. A fearful situation is still scary and unnerving. An injustice visited upon us still makes us angry, rageful even. The truth is, dear ones, bad things happen to good people all the time. That's just life. And Paul knows this and remind us in this beautiful text that through it all, God loves us. "For I am convinced," Paul tells us, "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." Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Nothing changes the love God has for us nor the plans God has for us. Nothing. Not even our own anxieties and fears. Not even our own sadness and anger. Not even our own doubts and worries. Nothing separates us from God's love for us. Only we can do that. But, why would we? Amen.