

Sermon

Rev. Sonja L. Ingebritsen

July 30, 2017—Ord 17A

Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Spirit Prayed the Treasure into My Heart

May the words spoken, and the words received, be only in your service, great God of Love. Amen.

It was interesting to me that our Roman's passage was in the lectionary this week.

“Nothing can separate you from the love of God.”

I whispered these words in my mother's ear the last day she was still able to talk. For several hours, before we could get her agitation under control, she was in distress. Her body was in physical pain, but it was her emotional and spiritual pain that was most evident that particular day. She wasn't lucid except for moments, but she talked and talked. She seemed fearful.

We tried to reassure her. “Everything is alright. *You* are alright. You're doing good.”

“I am?” she asked.

“Yes,” I told her.

“Okay,” she said. But moments later she returned to the distress and was inconsolable. Was there anything we could say that would help ease her soul? Or was she just doing her spiritual work out loud, and we were interfering? We

couldn't tell, but we kept looking for the magic words that would ease her spirit.

My mom was a woman of deep faith. When Dad would have a difficult day with his dementia and the nurse called mom to come comfort him, she would recall stories with him of other hard times—like her difficult pregnancy when the twins were stillborn, or when she'd had cancer, or when they'd encountered difficulties in a congregation he served. She'd tell the stories and remind him that God had always been with them in the past, so surely God was taking care of them now. Or when she was having a particularly difficult day when I called, she might remind herself, "God's always had us in the past, so I know God's got me now." Or if she was too upset to get to that touchstone, *I* could remind her and she would seem satisfied to lay a part of her burden down. If only for the duration of the conversation. But here, in her dying, she was having a difficult time leaning into her experience that God had her back.

"Nothing can separate you from God's love," I whispered in Mom's ear. "Not even death. I trust that for you. Even if you can't right now. You are doing alright. You are alright."

What do we depend on when everything else is stripped away? It's a question so evident to be asked in our active dying, when we can't escape the fact

that even our last breath will soon be gone. Yet, it's a question so easy to avoid in our active living. If one thing goes, we have a lot to fill the vacuum, especially those of us who live in relative affluence. If we lose our job, likely we still have our connections and education and experience and know how. If we don't get that scholarship, likely we still have our athletic accolades and friends on snapchat and a place to call home and support people who can help us figure out another option. If our significant other leaves us, likely we still have our job and friends and the promise offered by Tinder or match.com. There are so many layers to peel away before we find ourselves in a place where we, at our *core*, know our need of God.

And yet, our tradition and scripture tell us—and sometimes we even believe it—that the indwelling God at our center, God's unfailing love, is the most significant treasure we ever need hope for. So significant, in fact, that it is more valuable than all else we possess—jobs, money, homes, stuff, reputation, accomplishments, or even relationships. So significant that we are called to walk in the way of Jesus, despite the costs.

“Blessed are the poor,” or “poor in spirit” depending upon the translation, we hear in the Beattitudes. “For theirs is the realm of heaven.” Perhaps this is so because in poverty there is so little clutter between one's spirit and God, and the need for God is acute. Those who are poor in *things* don't have the B.S. of affluence to cut through before they stand naked before God. Likewise, those who

are hungry of spirit can't fall back on the falsehood that they have the power to "get it together" adequately enough to deserve the immense love that is ours, not because of who *we* are but because of who *God* is. To stand before God in our stark, stripped-down self and know the vastness of God's love is also to understand that nothing, *nothing*, can ever separates us from it.

What would be different in us, in the world, in the whole of creation—if humanity lived as if that were so? Who would we be? How would we comprehend others? What would be our response to comprehending that reality?

As I sat with my mom those two weeks, worrying over her, advocating for her, keeping vigil with her while she was dying, I was aware of another of the promises we heard in our scripture reading from Romans this morning, that the Spirit of God knows the prayers of our hearts and intercedes for us when we aren't able to find the words ourselves. I wasn't a pastor those days. I was just a daughter. Broken-hearted for the pain that someone I loved was experiencing. Wishing it didn't have to be so. Knowing what a struggle life had been for my mom, and cursing that her dying should have to be so hard, too.

"God, you'll have to take this; I don't know how to pray right now." I said this more than once. It had to be enough.

As we came to the end of the second week with Mom and made the decision to have a celebration of life at her bedside rather than wait until she died to have a

memorial service, the Spirit *did* find words, and shared them with me. She found words for me to be both daughter *and* pastor as I officiated that service. Through the Spirit we sent her on her way with God's love—whenever that time would come. A good friend of my parents who was in the room with our family said to me afterwards, "I noticed a change in Linda's countenance during the service. I think God took her hand. I don't think she's with us anymore."

As it turned out, just hours after that her body did let go, and she went home to glory. Maybe it was just her time. Maybe the nine days without food or water simply caused her body to shut down at last. Or maybe some part of her spirit heard our prayers, our remembrances, our singing, and our commending her to God. Maybe our collective assurances of God's unbounded love for her in some way eased whatever was standing in the way of her knowing this for herself, and she was finally and fully able to rest into God's embrace. We didn't need to know. It is enough that she is now at peace.

This week I read a book by Anne Lamott called *Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy*. Lamott is masterful in seeing God in the dregs of life—those places where we want to scream "Life isn't fair!" or those times when we want to hide from ourselves or others because our shortcomings make us feel too vulnerable to be exposed to the light of day. In the last paragraph of the book, Lamott uses some of the images we heard in our scripture reading from Matthew.

She writes:

Images of tiny things, babies, yeast, and mustard seeds can guide us; things that grow are what change everything. Moments of compassion, giving, grief, and wonder shift our behavior, get inside us and change realms we might not have agreed to have changed. Each field is weeds and wheat, but mix the wheat with yeast, the most ordinary of elements, and it starts changing the flour. It becomes bread and so do we, bread to eat and to offer. The world keeps going on. You can have yet another cup of coffee and keep working on your plans. *Or* you can take the risk to be changed, surrounded, and indwelled in the strange yeasty mash called mercy ...¹

And what is more merciful, what is a greater treasure, than the promise that “neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, neither heights nor depths—nor anything else in all creation—will be able to separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus, our Savior?”²

In both our dying and in our living, may we trust this promise of unfailing and unconditional love. But when we can't, may we know that the Spirit will intercede on our behalf.

Merciful God, receive our thanks. Amen.

¹ Anne Lamott, *Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 176.

² Romans 8, *Inclusive Language Bible*