

## PENTECOST XI

***“ 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.”*** Romans 8:38-9

A friend and colleague asked me last week to help her out in thinking about a funeral. She was coming to the end of a long stretch of very hard work, and she said her resources were depleted in trying to think or offer comfort. She needed to find words of consolation for a family who had lost the mother and two daughters in three years, each one in the month of June. The most recently deceased had had a terrible cancer but was also advanced in alcoholism.

And the father was a Unitarian who had not chosen any Scripture to be part of the service. I could understand why this all posed a challenge.

I said that I always find comfort and inspiration in this passage from Romans. I often suggest it to people for a reading at a funeral or memorial service, especially when the life and or death of a person seems particularly problematic or unresolved.

*Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.* This is perhaps the greatest of the Pauline promises. *Who will separate us from the love of Christ?* Paul asks, and then offers a list of threatening events that we ourselves can and do bring about: *hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword.* Paul covers a good deal of the territory of human suffering and cruelty here. But we can conquer all these afflictions *through Christ who loved us.* And we know that this is true. We all know stories, and we have all had experiences, of astonishing human triumph over daunting challenges. We have all been amazed by the resilience of the human spirit.

But then comes another list. *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.* The horizon expands radically. Not only are human actions incapable of separating us from the love of Christ; neither can superhuman powers. Neither can the mysterious and unseen forces that rule the world.

Paul is confident. Paul is emphatic. *Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.* Confidence. Emphasis. As my friend and I talked about her homily for the funeral, these were the gifts we felt she had to offer to a grieving, bewildered, and

perhaps angry family. A family angry with a daughter who had allowed her addiction to vanquish her quality of life. A family angry at the cancer that had taken so many of their members in so short a time. A family quite probably and quite understandably angry with God, and a Unitarian father who perhaps wanted God to be no part of the service at all. In the face of all that, Paul's unequivocal assertion: God will take care of us; God will not abandon us; and God will not allow us to get away.

My friend and I had that conversation a week ago on Friday, and then on Tuesday I had the news that our beloved parishioner and dear friend Perry Williams had died, peacefully, in his sleep. All of us who knew Perry had watched him fail in the last several years— fail in speech and in strength, until finally he disappeared from our Sunday gatherings and retreated into the privacy of his home, with round-the-clock care.

As I let people know the news of Perry's passing, I realized that some – maybe many- of you did not know that he was a retired priest. Indeed, he had long service as the Dean of the Cathedral in Cleveland Ohio. By the time I came to St John's in 1992 he and his wife Anne were retired and living in Jamaica Plain. He worked as a priest at a summer chaplain in Maine, until just a couple of years ago, he taught a bit at Episcopal Divinity School when I first knew him, and in the early years he would supply for me occasionally on a Wednesday evening or Sunday.

Perry had a ministry to all who volunteered as readers of the Sunday lessons. He never used a computer. Every week he would read the appointed lessons, research them a bit, and then send a hand-written note to the assigned reader giving them some biblical and theological background and a word of encouragement about their ministry. He coached everyone in how to read effectively.

And Perry had a ministry to me personally. I could not have asked for a better friend and colleague, priest and mentor, to have in a congregation. He used me as his priest, and came to me regularly with personal and family issues. And I used him as priest and mentor, asking his advice, working through parish problems with him. We talked theology together, talked "church" together, laughed and cried and cursed together over the 15 years of our friendship.

Perry was sometimes quick and sardonic. He sometimes held forth in long, well-thought-out, fully formed paragraphs. He always came to me with a briefcase, from which he would produce a list of items he wanted to discuss. He made sure we covered his agenda, even as we digressed and told stories and gossiped about goings on in the wider Church.

But what I remember most vividly, and what came to prevail when I visited him at home after he became unable to get out and about, was our silences – silences interspersed in our conversations throughout all the years of our friendship. We were both very comfortable sitting quietly together as we pondered something one or the other of us had said. For years we would sit in my study. For the last year, we would sit in his living room. The silence surrounded us. We were not in any rush. The silence enveloped us, and I think we both felt embraced by the spaciousness of God. The silence was holy for me, for both of us, I believe.

In his last months, Perry really could only repeat what you said back to him. He didn't originate many topics of conversation, because speech was so difficult for him. His mind was intact and his spirits were extraordinary, and his wit never deserted him. When I showed him pictures of the new basement he managed to convey –“This neatness doesn't seem like St John's at all!” He never stopped giving high fives and thumbs up and okay signs to indicate his enthusiasm.

But it was all clearly an effort, and so we sat more and more in companionable silence.

I have talked often in the past about the dying of my priest and mentor Dick Martin, who had brain cancer; how over time he lost linear language and spoke symbolically; how the trappings of personality were stripped away until it seemed that we were connecting and communicating at the very level of our souls. Something similar happened with Perry. His mind was all there, it seemed, but its expression was inaccessible or reduced to bare essentials.

In ways, that was hard, frustrating and painful for me, as it had been with Dick Martin. And I can only imagine how it was for Perry. He told me resolutely that he did not want other visitors, and I think that his pride and his inability to communicate clearly informed that refusal. At the same time, I felt that when we were together, we were held in that holy silence that is God's gift. And I had my experience with Dick to remind me that the loss of language, the increasing silence, had served not to separate us but to bind us ever more deeply together. That happened with Perry as well.

Perry couldn't or wouldn't come to church any more, and he didn't want me to bring him communion. But I never felt that he was rejecting religion or God or faith. I felt, rather, that *nothing could separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus*, and that in the silence he was growing closer and closer to the mystery at the heart of God.

Perry's is not a death that causes anger or confusion, I think. Anyone I've talked to who knew him recently, beginning with his son, has said that his passing is a blessing, that he is in a better place, that he is at peace. And of course I believe that.

So I don't need Paul's extraordinary promise to assuage my anger or calm my confusion. I don't need Paul, right now, to remind me of the capacity of the human spirit to triumph over adversity.

No, what I give thanks for now is Paul's reminder of the great mystery that fills the silence. The mystery that connects us to one another and to God through life and death and height and depth and powers and angels. The mystery that is at the very heart of faith, at the very heart of the world. *Nothing, nothing, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

*Alleluia! Amen.*