

LWML Sunday
Romans 8:31 – 39
Rev Joseph Highley
(transcribed from his sermon on Sunday, October 23rd, 2022)

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God, our Father, and our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our sermon text for this morning on LWML Sunday is from our Epistle reading Romans eight, verses 31 through 39, which happens to be one of my favorite passages from the Bible. At first glance or even second glance, this isn't really a passage that I would've expected to see on LWML Sunday.

LWML stands for Lutheran Women's Missionary League, and it is an absolutely wonderful organization. The amount of work that women in this organization do is just absolutely amazing. If you are a member of LWML and you happen to be wearing purple, or even, I guess, if you're a member not wearing your purple today, would you please stand right now?

Don't be shy. So this – Steve, you're not a member of – other people are wearing purple to support - stay standing. Look around. LWML is open to any woman of any age. So be on the lookout. Little Mia is ready to go, all eight weeks of her on this earth. If you want to know the different things the LWML is involved in here in this congregation, come talk to one of these women.

All right, you can be seated now. I had you guys standing a lot today. I forgot to have you sit down once we came forward for the baptism. That's a rookie pastor mistake. Except I'm a sophomore now, so I can't really claim that. That was a good joke. Freshman, sophomore, then you're a senior, then you graduate. I don't know what happens then. You take your first call. Which is here.

So our local LWML here at First Lutheran is involved in a bunch of things. They're currently making bracelets that tell the whole gospel story on the bracelet. Our goal is to, I think, make something like 5,000 in the district and we here at First Lutheran are going to try and make like a thousand of those 5,000 in the Oklahoma District. High goals being set. We do baby kits. We do all sorts of different fundraisers. Millions of dollars every year is distributed from the national LWML to fund service projects, mission projects, evangelism projects. It's absolutely incredible. They're highly organized. They have their schedule for the entire year already mapped out, so it's easy to just plug in and join when you want to, so ask one of these women in purple how you can get involved.

These women of the LWML, they're humble servants of God. They're committed to serving the church and that's where I think that this passage comes into play. Because while these

women have an impact here in this church, on this community, outside, in this country, in the world at large, it's actually only in response, a result, if you will, of their identity in Christ demonstrated in a passage just like this one.

These women are first and foremost children of God, loved by him, saved by him. The work that they do flows out of that reality from God. So let's talk about Romans eight. Romans 8: 31 through 39. Our theme this morning is that nothing can separate God's love in Christ Jesus for you.

So, my first question, and you can follow along in your pew Bibles or follow along in your bulletins, my first question is a rhetorical question. It might be my favorite rhetorical question I've ever heard, and it's this. Have you ever heard a rhetorical question before?

[Congregation laughs]

Why is nobody answering that? Okay, rhetorical questions aren't really meant to be answered. They're making some other point, or the answer is just kind of assumed. Well, here the point is this: That this section of the book of Romans is filled with rhetorical questions. We're just going to walk step by step through this passage, so follow along.

The first rhetorical question is in verse 31, What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? If God is for you, who can be against you? Paul, in these questions, does this thing where we move from the greater to the lesser. He starts with God. He's already spoken of God in this letter to the Romans as this almighty and righteous and powerful God.

If that God is for you, then you move to the lesser – who else could possibly be against you? But I think there are two questions we have to ask about that. The first is kind of a big one, is God really for us? I mean, Paul makes just kind of this assumption right here that God is for you – then who could possibly be against you.

But I ask, is God for you? Is God for you? And how do you know if he is for you? This passage, thankfully, has a very clear answer to that one. Yes. Yes, God is for you. The very next verse, Paul doesn't let it hang out there for too long, verse 32, he says, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all." There's no clearer message from God than this, that he is for you because he gave up his Son for you into death. The perfect, righteous Son of God, given up by God for you, a broken sinner. Is God for you? Well you need look no further than the cross for the answer to that question.

Here we have another example of Paul working from the greater to the lesser. If God gave up his Son, the perfect, righteous, spotless Son of God, then how would he not possibly give you all things? All things are nothing in comparison to God's Son that he has given for you. So, the answer is yes, God is for you.

The second question we need to ask of this rhetorical question is to actually answer the rhetorical question, who could be against us? I think a lot, actually, the implied statement is not that the world is somehow on our side, but rather that while the world may be against us, it just simply doesn't matter. Anyone or anything could be against us because in Christ we have victory. It doesn't matter. In Christ, we are secure in victory. In Christ we're even more than conquerors. St. Paul in this passage is even willing to go so far as to say, in verse 36, for your sake, we are being killed all the day long. Killed, all the day long, for the sake of Christ in whom we have victory. We gladly lay down our lives for Christ because none of it, however violent or awful or tragic can touch our identity and security in Christ.

Don't we often live the exact opposite of that reality? Don't we often live like the approval of this world or victory in the world or righteousness in the world, or even just victory in our own eyes is the most important thing, even more important than where we stand in Christ? Don't we often live like the world just too much against us? It's just too strong. We just have to give into it. It's just too overwhelming. We have to succumb. We have to live like the rest of the world. We don't live like those who already have the victory, like those who are in Christ with nothing that can stand against us. Yet that's the promise that we're given here.

That's what we're called to repent of and that's what we're called to believe. God is for you. Even when everywhere you look around you, it may seem like he is not, he is. If you doubt it, we simply turn to the cross for proof. God is for you.

Then Paul moves quickly from this point about nothing in this world being able to stand against us, and he moves in a specific way that the world often tries to stand against us, in a specific way that the devil tries to stand against us, a specific way that we ourselves like to stand against ourselves. That's through condemnation. You are God's elect. You are those God has chosen to have faith in His word. You are those who have been baptized into Christ just like little Caycee just moments ago.

Who can condemn us? The only one who can and condemn is God. And God says, you're justified in Christ. Indeed, justification can only come from God. Some of us are living like the approval or condemnation of the world, can really have a say over who we are. Sure, the approval or condemnation of the world can really make our lives difficult.

We have to be honest about that. No one's denying that. It can make life hard as a Christian when the world either condemns you or wants you to seek its approval. But it cannot touch your identity. It cannot touch who you are in Christ. No charge can be brought against you to God because you are in Christ.

Then Paul moves right past this, right into the last part. Nothing can be against us. Nothing can condemn us. Who or what shall separate us from the love of Christ? This last rhetorical question, who or what can separate us from the love of Christ?

For that, I want to show a visual for you. I thought quite a while about how I could visualize this. I went through this in so many ways in my head. I have toddlers. They're very messy. I do the laundry in the house as well, so I'm very acutely aware of how messy they are.

[Pastor Highley has a clear shallow bin on top of a table. He has a white t-shirt and a coffee cup.]

Now, this is a designer white t shirt. \$75 on Amazon. It's got that like been worn quite a bit look to it. Really, really fancy white t-shirt, brand new straight out of the box. This is a cup of three day old coffee.

I'm thinking I'm going to just, just dip, just that little bit in there. Now, that's a coffee stain. That is a coffee stain. I don't think that sucker's coming out, but just in case any of you were thinking, well, you only dipped the corner of it. You don't ever see the corner of it. Let's just pour some coffee on there.

[Pastor Highley pours coffee all over the t-shirt.]

Oh yeah. Now that is a coffee stain. That is some good stuff right there. Ethiopian blend, probably? That's not coming out. God's love for you is like a coffee stain and a white t-shirt. It cannot be separated. It cannot come out. And I know some of you are going Pastor Joe, you can just bleach the tar out of that thing.

It probably says dry, clean only by like, it has to be breathed on by a snail from Ethiopia, because that's how fancy shirts are. You can't just toss them in the wash. Well, let's just say that this just happened to be a Reebok shirt that had been worn for a while and I was trying to get the stain out. You would say, ah, you can get a coffee stain out, no problem.

[Pastor Highley is holding a clear cup of red wine.]

I'm like, Well fine. What about red wine?

[Pastor Highley pours the red wine all over the t-shirt.]

Oh yeah. That is a beautiful red wine stain. Right there. I mean, this thing is almost looking like tie dye at this point. God's love for you is like a, whew, that's, that's pungent. Red wine – I'm getting notes of oak and vanilla – God's love for you is like a red wine stain on a white t-shirt.

You cannot get that out. And that's, and that's your sermon, that's your visual for the day. God's love is like the red wine stain on this brand new \$200 white T-shirt.

But I know some of you are still saying that's bad. That's real bad. Why couldn't you have just dipped it? And I say that whenever I see my kids come home and it's like, ah, you got the marker on the sleeve, could you have left it on the sleeve and not then proceeded to go through the rest of the shirt? But you know, even if bleach can't take that out, there's something that can take it out. And I know that because I routinely spill red wine on my alb, this robe that I'm wearing, and the Altar Guild ladies get it out every time.

It's incredible. Well done.

[The congregation applauds for the Altar Guild.]

Yes, they deserve a round of applause for that. So it can't be that God's love is like this disgustingly stained, I mean, this is just going in the trash \$250 or not, this shirt's going in the trash. I don't want to mess with cleaning that thing. But if I wanted to, I could get that stain out.

So I started thinking in my head, as I'm thinking of this visual, I'm like, what if I get a colored T-shirt and I pour some bleach on it, which is really dangerous because if I get bleach on this carpet, I'm in trouble.

[Congregation laughs.]

But it occurred to me that bleach is really not coloring or staining a fabric. It's removing the color from the fabric, which is actually an evidence of a way that you can separate things and you can indeed then just dye it. Now, it's not going to match probably ever, but you could then just re-dye the shirt.

So I study this more and more and more, and I'm going through my head, What sort of visual can we think of to visualize that God's love cannot be separated from us in Christ. I started thinking, I started researching, I started looking through it and there are these things in science as we get smaller and smaller and smaller and we get to the basic building blocks of all the things that we see and these are inseparable items. There are those things that cannot be separated by chemical or physical means and we call them elements. Once you get down to that level where physical or chemical means cannot separate it, you have elements and I'm thinking, ta-da.

I found it. God's love for you is like an element, carbon, oxygen, hydrogen, helium, something like that. But then I remembered, oh yeah, there's that Robert Oppenheimer fella. The Manhattan Project, where they actually discovered through nuclear physics, not chemical or physical, you can separate the atom, the element from itself.

[The congregation laughs.]

I wouldn't recommend it. Might have a mess on your hands.

I tried to think of other things and it seems that there's just about anything in this universe that you can find some way to separate from itself. First thing, of course, I thought of in this entire experiment was glitter. Once that stuff gets on you or on something, you're not getting that glitter out forever. But no, eventually it might take 50 years that glitter is coming off.

Brothers and sisters, the closest thing I could come up with that is inseparable are mathematical equations, mathematical functions where you have prime numbers, where you have a number like a two or a three or a seven or a 13, something where the number can only be divided by itself and the number one, and so then you end up with either the number one or itself, and it basically has not been divided. But even that's just a crock, because I've set the parameters myself. Can you take the number seven and divide it? Well, sure. Not in a way that it would become a smaller whole integer, which is the point of prime numbers. You can divide seven by seven and it's one. Divide, seven by one and it's seven. But you can divide seven by two. It's just three and a half. It's not a whole number, but you can divide it in two.

[The congregation laughs.]

I keep coming and I keep going, and everything can be separated, and it finally just occurred to me. There's nothing that I can think of that can compare the truth and the reality. There is nothing in this creation that can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. That love defines you.

That love makes you who you are. It gives you your identity. It forgives you all of your sins and it gives you life and salvation. Do you think your sin can separate you from God? No. It's atoned for. It's covered. It's been removed from you as far as the east is from the west. Not even your worst sin can take you away from the love of God in Christ.

Repent of it. Confess it. Turn from it. Don't dwell in it, receive forgiveness, be washed clean and live in God's love, which cannot be removed from you. More so than coffee or red wine on a white t-shirt that was \$500. More so than an atomic particle. More so than mathematical theorems.

I guess the best way that I could say it is this, "For I am sure 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."

In his name. Amen. May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord, now and forever. Amen.