

## **Romans 8: 38-39**

### **12 (13) Scriptures Project**

**January 25, 2015**

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What do you think the story of the girl and the bicycle has to do with these verses about God's unconditional love for us? In what way does this story reflect that unconditional love? Where is God in the story of the girl and the bicycle?

These two seemingly straightforward verses hold a fundamental mystery of faith. We proclaim that God loves us unconditionally, yet many things in life cast doubts on this love. Even heroes of the faith have often experienced a "dark night of the soul" when they doubt the presence of God in their journey.

This is a mystery. On the one hand, when we experience loss and pain – the death of a loved one or a broken relationship; sustained unemployment and financial struggle; physical pain; depression or loneliness; oppression due to the color of one's skin or sexual orientation or gender identity – when we experience pain and loss, we question God's love, or God's existence at all. Where is God in all of this? Yet on the other hand, sometimes it is one's simple conviction about God's love that sustains through such pain and loss. Maybe it's both at the same time. This is a mystery. As I have listened to these two simple verses the last couple weeks, I feel like the mystery has only deepened. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Yet so many things do happen in life that test this conviction.

So first and foremost I invite you to hear these verses as both wisdom and mystery.

*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.*

Sermon fragments... What I've got for you this morning is fragments. I hope they add up to a sermon. But I don't see a neat and tidy progression from A to B to C. I just hope by the end each of you has gotten hold of some fragment that gives you a bit of inspiration for the week to come. So I'll simply dump out these fragments and see what takes hold.

For one, you might recall that two weeks ago I preached another sermon about love, the first in this series on our favorite scripture passages. I concluded that sermon with a challenge from Richard Hays. Hays is a scholar of biblical ethics who argues that love is not sufficiently one of the core ethical themes of the New Testament. He admits that this flies in the face of most people's assumptions about the bible. So he explains this way:

The term has become debased in popular discourse... [But] The biblical story teaches us that God's love cannot be reduced to "inclusiveness": authentic love calls us to repentance, discipline, sacrifice, and transformation. We can recover

the power of love only by insisting that love's meaning is to be discovered in the New Testament's story of Jesus—therefore, in the cross.[1]

Last week I heard Krista Tippet's interview with Civil Rights leader John Lewis who reflects profoundly about love. I can't decide if Lewis' reflections are the perfect rebuttal to Richard Hays, or if they completely reinforce his point. Either way they belong beside each other. John Lewis is now a member of congress, where he has served for decades. During the 1960s he was a freedom rider and helped orchestrate the march in Selma that became famously remembered as Bloody Sunday. He was arrested more than 40 times for acts of civil disobedience. Listen to what he says about love:

Well, I think in our culture, I think sometimes people are afraid to say I love you. But we're afraid to say, especially in public life, many elected officials or worldly elected officials, are afraid to talk about love. Maybe people tend to think something is so emotional about it. Maybe it's a sign of weakness. And we're not supposed to cry. We're supposed to be strong, but love is strong. Love is powerful.

The movement created what I like to call a nonviolent revolution. It was love at its best. It's one of the highest form of love. That you beat me, you arrest me, you take me to jail, you almost kill me, but in spite of that, I'm going to still love you. I know Dr. King used to joke sometime and say things like, "Just love the hell outta everybody. Just love 'em." [2]

That is the kind of love that is core to the gospel. It's the kind of love God expresses for us in Jesus.

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Another fragment... Mary Lou Weaver Houser was one of the CMCLers who listed these verses as important for her faith journey. Listen to what this passage means for her:

This Romans excerpt, as I have come to understand it, depicts a total immersion in what paleontologist/geologist/philosopher/theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin describes as the "divine milieu."

... Both writers had an uncanny grasp of how this Mystery of Presence encompasses everything... it is literally that in which "we live and move and have our being." (Acts 17:28)...

It is this, and this only, that will sustain us through the present unraveling of our familiar systems.

Nothing can separate us from this wonder...

For her this passage is all about interconnectedness. The profound reality of interconnectedness hardly needs recounting. New examples of this are emerging over and over. Everything from new revelations in physics to the concept of six degrees of separation, from the complexities of how each living thing impacts the biosphere to

increasingly global impact of economics and politics – we are profoundly interconnected.

Mary Lou didn't say what she meant by "the present unraveling of our familiar systems." But I know she is one who is deeply concerned about the reality of global climate change. Later this spring Mary Lou and Monte Garber will be leading a book discussion during Adult CE about the book *Collapsing Consciously* – a collection of meditations on how we are invited to respond to the impending epic changes brought on by climate change and the profound economic reverberations that will surely follow.[3]

Remarkably, Paul also writes earlier in chapter 8 of Romans, just a few verses before today's reading, about the groaning of creation. He writes:

The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility... We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves... (Romans 8: 19-20a and 22-23a)

I have no idea what Paul meant by this. Obviously he was not talking about global climate change. To make full sense of this is probably a whole other sermon. But for now, notice that the well-being of the planet is intimately bound up with our own well-being and our own sense of, embrace of, trust in God's unconditional and permeating love. As Mary Lou says, "It is this, and this only, that will sustain us through the present unraveling of our familiar systems. Nothing can separate us from this wonder."

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Another fragment. Seemingly in a different direction. Ron, Laurie, Annie and Ellis Vogt also listed these verses as important to the faith of their household. Listen to what Ron says about it:

For Laurie and Ron, we both lost a parent way too early, Laurie was 14 and Ron was 24. Having to live with death of a parent so early touches a core of wondering if love is really bigger than death. To me the sing song cadence of "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" reminds me of a children's story like Munch's "I Love You Forever" or "I Love You Stinky Face" or "Mama, Do you Love Me?" It just helps me yield into trusting that there's no chance that it's not true, even though times and events in life haven't reflected it when death or pain have entered.

These reflections point back to another sentiment expressed by Paul in this chapter of Romans, again just verses before today's reading. As in other of his letters, here Paul claims we are children of God, heirs of God. Like Christ, we have been welcomed into God's family. I think it is very profound the kind of love Ron describes in his reflections on this passage. As one who lost a parent, for him the unconditional love he feels with God is in a way like the love of a parent, and in another way totally transcends those relationships. This love is tender and personal and tangible.

I wonder at the vast expanse covered by these two sets of reflections. Following the thoughts of Mary Lou and of Ron, the divine love expressed in these two simple verses is cosmic and familial. It is epic and immediate. It is deeply personal and profoundly global. That is a mystery to me. But it is good news.

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Is there a way to tie up these various threads of reflection? What does any of this mean for us on a re-covenanting Sunday when we are invited to consider our commitments to this community of faith?

This past Wednesday, on a snowy evening when I thought no one was likely to show up for a church meeting, a hearty group of people gathered here to hear ideas from and give feedback to one of the working groups of our church Council. Kevin Kautz and Lori Bergey took on the task this fall of looking at CMCL's Leadership Selection process, at how we match volunteers with roles in the church, to see how we revamp it to meet the realities of a busy congregation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Lo and behold, as Kevin and Lori took this on, they quickly decided they wanted to deepen to focus to exploring how we make meaningful connections with each other. So at our meeting on Wednesday they rolled out their idea for a "known and loved database" – for a system of collecting stories and profiles about each other that can be used by old-timers and newcomers alike as a hook to start conversations and meaningful interaction with each other. They propose gathering information through one-on-one interviews responding to a couple basic questions like "What are your passions in life? What do you enjoy doing?" and "How has CMCL impacted your life?" These would be collected in and compiled in a systematic way – including photos – and shared via some sort of electronic device so that anyone here can browse it.

Those of us gathered together to vet this idea were enthusiastic. It sounded like fun. And it sounded really useful to anyone who has had the experience of showing up on Sunday morning and sitting down next to someone they don't recognize. CMCL is a big enough and scattered enough group that the seeming stranger sitting next to you could be someone who has attended the other service for years, or someone who attends as often as you – that is, be honest, only every other Sunday – and you've somehow never bumped into each other before. Or it could genuinely be a newcomer to this congregation who is longing to meet new people and you were too sheepish to say hello. For anyone who has had an experience like this, a hi-tech directory full of anecdotes and conversation starters could be very helpful.

This all reminds me of the congregational assessment we did last spring and summer. One of the things the assessment showed was a list of potential priorities ranked according to how important we think they are. Where we should put our best energy in the coming season of the life of this congregation. The #1 priority for CMCL that you all identified was this: "Create more opportunities for people to form meaningful relationships."

Kevin and Lori's project is one of the more innovative, exciting and energetic undertakings I've seen at CMCL striving directly toward this goal of more opportunities for meaningful relationship.

Furthermore, as I reflect on the anecdotes about love – the suffering, patient love described by John Lewis, the epic, cosmic love described by Mary Lou and the intimate, tender love described by Ron and Laurie – as I reflect on these they are also striving toward more meaningful relationship.

So on this re-covenanting Sunday I invite us to consider what it would mean to truly embrace this priority for the coming year – to create more opportunities for people to form meaningful relationships.

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What would it mean to create more and more opportunities to get in touch with the radical, patient, cosmic and tender love of the Holy One who calls us into her midst?

[1] Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross New Creation, A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 202.

[2] “The Art and Discipline of Nonviolence,” on *On Being* (Jan. 15, 2015). Transcript available online at: [http://onbeing.org/program/john-lewis-the-art-discipline-of-nonviolence/transcript/7229#main\\_content](http://onbeing.org/program/john-lewis-the-art-discipline-of-nonviolence/transcript/7229#main_content). Accessed Jan. 26, 2015.

[3] See Carolyn Baker, *Collapsing Consciously: Transformative Truths for Turbulent Times*, forward by John Michael Greer (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2013).