

What would we say...

Menno Mennonite Church
July 3, 2022

An adapted sermon on the occasion of the Death of Gavin Morse

Romans 8:26-28;31-39

26 Likewise
the Spirit helps us in our weakness;
for we do not know how to pray as we ought,
but that very Spirit intercedes
with sighs too deep for words.

27 And God, who searches the heart,
knows what is the mind of the Spirit,
because the Spirit intercedes
for the saints according to the will of God.

28 We know that all things work together for good for those who love God,
who are called according to God's purpose.

31 What then are we to say about these things?
If God is for us, who is against us?
32 He who did not withhold his own Son,
but gave him up for all of us,
will he not with him also give us everything else?

35 Who will separate us from the love of Christ?
Will hardship, or distress, or persecution,
or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

36 As it is written,
"For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors
through him who loved us.

38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels,
nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,
39 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.

There are times in which words fail us. Some situations defy even our best efforts to summarize, crystallize and express our complex thoughts and feelings within the simplicity of language. We attempt to speak to our reality in times such as these-- times of grief, times of loss, times of saddened celebration-- we are unavoidably drawn to the run on sentences our grammar teachers warn us against. We try to summarize the enormity of the many emotions, feelings, memories, and thoughts that visit us within the rawness of grief. This is how we feel now, and I am guessing that words will not start flowing more easily as the days go on. Our spirits groan within us, not sure what to say, what to do, what to feel. But even in that, we add our prayers for the many that are ascending for the Moseses and for the loss that we see and know.

These verses are among my favorite. Not only do they speak almost irresistibly to the realities in which we live, and the faith in which we hope, but they declare that which is most true—there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God, or the Spirit of the living God who speaks on our behalf. I love them because they are true, yes, but even more so because they are so very, innately human. With the questions—our questions that we ask of God all the time. Why does God, at times, feel so far from us? How do we cope with the pressures and realities of life and of living in a world that can be so very challenging? How do we pray when prayer seems to elude?

These words are so beautiful because they are so profound as a statement of theological truth. But most of the time, we still don't read these words as Paul intended them to be read. I am not speaking of any sort of mistranslation, lack of comprehension, or theological misunderstanding in the way that we read Paul's words. Rather, our error is far more simple: we often forget how and why these words were written in the first place. We forget that at its core, this is a letter. The book of Romans is one of the central books of the holy scripture that forms our faith, and is where we often turn for the scriptural foundations of some of the core ideas of our faith. It is thought to be some of Paul's best recorded thinking about what it means to be the body of Christ. With this in our heads, we tend to think of it so highly, that we don't often hear the words as they were first written; the simple words of a pastor writing from one church to another, reaching out across the distance to console, counsel, and advise brothers and sisters in a different place. To speak to hardships, and to teach of what he has observed of the Spirit and the workings of the church. It is a human work relating to human problems; the ones that defy our ability to speak them out or really to know what to do with them. I don't think there is a whole

lot of point in sugar coating the realities of being a church in that time. A brief walk through the earlier chapters of *Martyrs Mirror* will readily convince you of the risks and realities involved. These are not idol questions of whether there is separation to be had, or the various things of life and living would, ultimately take their toll. Paul is addressing the problems of real people in real situations with real hope—nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. This is the promise we hold, now and always.

The apostle Paul as the author of these verses says he is “convinced” of this. He himself had suffered many hardships. At various points in his life and ministry he had been imprisoned, whipped, beaten, almost stoned to death, shipwrecked, in danger from rivers and robbers, hungry and thirsty, shivering in the cold. Yet despite all he had experienced, he remained convinced of God’s love in Jesus Christ. The One who had called him would not abandon him.

We know there is hardship, distress, persecution, famine, and peril. Some of you have experienced these things personally, and even now there are many in this world who are suffering. There IS evil and great suffering. Far from denying these things, these verses from Romans names them. But God does not abandon us to whatever difficulties we face. God is on our side. Distress and suffering are not the end. For God is with us and loves us.

Perhaps that is all that really must be said. Nothing in the world insulates us from the loss intrinsic to Love, the shared grief of ready tragedy. It is love that will cause us to rejoice. It is love that will cause us to mourn. It is love that buoy us up in the good times, and love that will see us through the bad times. And ultimately, it is love that will raise us up beyond our own selves, beyond our own imagining. It is love that will persist and resound when every word has been said, every dream has been dreamed, and we too will come to know fully the mystery the God’s everlasting and sustaining love for ourselves forever more. Hardship, real though it is, doe not overcome us. We can feel like it may, and the struggle will certainly always be real. Yet love—God’s love—formed us in the beginning, and holds us even at the very end. We do not bypass grief because we have God’s promises. We have God’s promises to guide us through all that would lay us low. And that is good.

In his commentary on the book of Romans, Paul Achtemaier says: “Evil exists. It is not to be denied, it is to be resisted. Yet evil is not the wave of the future, God’s loving care is” (*Romans*, John Knox Press, 1985).

Even now, death is not the end—for God is with us and loves us in this life and the next.
“God IS love” ([1 John 4:8](#)).

The hardship of death is real, but it is not God’s last word to us. The hardship of loss is real, but it is not God’s last word to us. The hardship of grief is real, but it is not God’s last word to us.

That is what real. That is what we hold together and separately. That is what we show the best way we know how.

For nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Thanks be to God! Amen.