

The Promise of Presence

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Romans 8: 26-39

Delivered on July 26, 2020

So, I think most of you know that in the Holmes household we've had a new dog now for about six months. Most of you also know that sadly we had to put our dog Bubba down at the beginning of the new year. But our grief over Bubba is being healed through the presence of a new dog, and there are three things I want to tell you about our new dog Amelia. First, she is a large dog, she weighs about 70 pounds. Second, because she is 70 pounds and full of energy, she is allowed on the couch. But I use the word allowed loosely. I don't know how to keep her off the couch. And then the third thing I want to tell you this morning is that Amelia is Kelly's dog. Now, Bubba was my dog. And by that, I mean Bubba was attached to me more than anyone else. He was a daddy's boy. But Amelia is as attached to Kelly as Bubba was to me. Well, now that I have given you this background allow me to get to the point.

And every morning when Kelly leaves for work, Amelia will do something that has become part of her daily routine. She will follow Kelly out the door and then once Kelly closes the door behind her, she will run into the living room as fast as her four legs will carry her, she will jump up on the couch, and then she will press her nose to the window to watch Kelly drive away, and she will whimper as she pulls out of sight. It is the saddest thing you've ever seen. And it always brings back memories of how as toddlers Sophia and Dominic used to cry inconsolably when we would drop them off at daycare. It is of course called separation anxiety. It is the anxiety that small children and pets feel when the people to whom they are emotionally attached leave their sight.

But even though we eventually learn that those who leave our sight come back, I'm not sure we ever get over separation anxiety. For the evidence of our five senses tells us that in death we are separated from one another never to come back. And it would appear that this causes us so much anxiety that we can't face death. Denial of death is a part of our culture. We don't say people died we say they passed away. We hide cemeteries deep in the woods. We say that people who talk about death too much or think about it too much are morbid, and we regard them as being socially maladjusted. We close caskets and cover them up with beautiful flowers.

If I am right about this, then it seems there is never a bad time to hear these words from Paul. 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. With God, Paul tells us, there is no separation, with God there is no cause for anxiety. And it is because of these words that no matter what people face in the life, I can confidently assure them that there is hope. When they face unemployment, there is hope. When they face divorce, or hospitalization, or the loss of mobility there is hope. And even when they face death there is hope. They are promised that nothing can separate them from God's love in Jesus Christ. And I think it is important that I tell you this morning that this is not my promise. I don't have the power to keep this promise. It is God's promise. And that matters because while I hope everyone watching me this morning thinks of me as a trustworthy person, even if you don't, even if you think I am a bald faced liar, you don't have to worry about whether you should take my word for it. This isn't my word. This isn't my promise. It's God's.

Because this is what God promises, I always say there is hope when I talk to people in despair. But even though I say this, armed as I am with passages like this one, some people wonder what in the world I'm talking about. Some people say the promise that we can never be separated from God is not comforting, but creepy. In recent years, you've probably heard about people becoming more and more alarmed about the presence of cameras everywhere that record their every move, and even more recently, you may have heard stories about people who are afraid that their cell phones are spying on them and certain apps you use on your phone secretly listen in to your conversations. That seems frightening, and it seems frightening because we all seem to value having a place to go where no one can see us or hear us. We value our privacy. It reminds people of Orwell's 1984 where Big Brother is always watching you. Well, I agree that the idea of a Big Brother God in the sky who is always watching you to catch you in some sin whether big or small is frightening. But I don't think such a God has anything to do with either Paul's words or the entire promise of the bible. The promise that nothing can separate us from the love of God is not the promise that God is always spying on us. It is the promise that God never abandons us. The psalmist says In the Lord I take refuge, how then can you say, flee like a bird to your mountain? There is nowhere that we have to flee and hide in God's universe. But there is nowhere in God's universe that we have to flee and hide not because God is busy destroying the wicked, just like God might watch us to destroy us after catching us in some sin. But rather it is the promise that no place is so dark and evil that God is not at work, even there. God isn't just at work within the four walls of the church.

When I was a ten year old kid, I remember one day I went to see the movie Gandhi where, if you remember Gandhi was played by Ben Kingsley. Now, it was a great film, it had wonderful

acting and wonderful cinematography and it told the story of Gandhi's life in a poignant way. It won best picture, if you remember. Although you probably didn't know many ten year olds who wanted to see it. But you know, I was a nerd, ok. Well, some time after that, I remember I was going to church with a friend and part of our visit to church that day included a visit to this friend's Sunday school class. So we gathered around with our chairs in a circle in this class, and the Sunday school teacher had us discuss some topic or another, and whatever it was it reminded me of the movie Gandhi I had seen so I thought I would share that with the class. Oh no, no, no. We shouldn't talk about Gandhi in this class because Gandhi was not a Christian. Well, back then, I don't think I thought anything of this. Ok, we can't talk about Gandhi in this class. But how absurd, how absurd. Gandhi may not have stood up in church and confessed that Jesus Christ is his Lord and Savior over the waters of baptism, but tell me, what Christian doesn't have something to learn about God from Gandhi? If you're a Christian and you don't think you have something to learn from a man who committed his whole life to nonviolence, justice and compassion, you might want to have your head examined. That's what Paul means when he says nothing can separate us from the love of God. That's what it means when you go to classrooms with the word THEOLOGY printed on the door where they talk about something called God's omnipresence. God is at work everywhere, even among people who don't believe what we believe.

And of course that doesn't mean that every place in the world is a happy place. The promise that God's love is at work everywhere doesn't mean that all the world's prisons and hospital wards and homeless shelters are suddenly transformed into Disney World. They are not. I don't think any of us would trade places with someone in a prison or someone in the

hospital or someone in a homeless shelter. These aren't fun places to be. But the promise that God is even in these places means that they are never hopeless places. They are never beyond the reach of God's hand or beyond the healing of Jesus' touch, and again, don't take my word for it. I'm not the one who made this promise. It is God's promise.

And because this is God's promise, not only do you not have to have any anxiety over whether I am trustworthy or not, you don't even have to have any anxiety over any kind of power that you might think I have. Years ago, I remember hearing about a church in suburban Atlanta that had a pastor for about twenty years. They all trusted him and thought he was a wonderful Christian man until they found out all kinds of seedy things about him. He was having two or three affairs at a time. He was embezzling money from the church. And after all this came to light he was finally asked to resign. Now, on one hand, everyone in the congregation was glad that they discovered his true colors, but on the other hand, they were now filled with anxiety. In two decades, this man had baptized lots of people in the church. At the time, no one doubted the validity of their baptism. But now that they learned what an unsavory character this pastor was, they wondered what if he didn't mean a word he said when he was standing by the baptismal font all those Sundays. Some people said we should have another pastor baptize us again, but then they wondered, what if he or she doesn't mean what they say. Well, again, folks, I sincerely hope all of you trust in the sincerity of my words. I am sure I would be hurt if I found out you didn't. But I don't have the power to stand in the way of the validity of your baptism. I'm just not that important. In the waning days of this summer go take a trip to the beach and stand beside the ocean, or climb the Rockies or go camping way out in the country and sit under the Milky Way, and as you look at this vast universe God has made, and you

wonder at the size of God's creation, ask yourself if you really believe little Rich Holmes or any pastor in the world for that matter really has the power to stand between you and the promises of God. Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Today for both of our churches we are celebrating our graduates. We celebrate the fact that our graduates are going out in the world or into college and are crossing the threshold from childhood to adulthood. I know that all of us wish this year was like other years and we could have these graduates present with us as they stand before you and we recognize them. This poor class of 2020 has been through enough this year. But to Sam and Jared, Christina, Jennifer and Erin, all of you who are graduating, know that while we cannot see all of you, all but one of you today, and you cannot see us, we are cheering you on. And I also want you to know, as you watch this service this morning, I want you to know that there is so much in life that we here at your church could give you. In spite of our scholarships, I wish we somehow had the money to pay for your entire education. But we can't do that here. I wish we could somehow guarantee you a future with perfect grades and the career of your dreams. We can't do that either. But what we can do is pray for you. What we can do beyond that is remind you that wherever you may go in life you are always welcome back here and you always have a home here, and beyond that what we can do is promise you that wherever life may take you, you are never apart from the God we have taught you about all your life. And I hope that means something to you.