

Nothing Can Separate Us from God's Love by Marla Chisholm
Sermon for 8.4.19

Last Sunday, we met at Waveny for an outdoor church service with our friends from St. Michael's. Many of you were there in that beautiful outdoor setting. At one point early in the service, I happened to glance to my right, and I saw a man come around the corner of the porch. It dawned on him what was going on, and he backed up and left. I mentioned this to Pastor Eric, and he said he also saw a woman and a boy do basically the same thing. None of them came in to join us. They would have, of course, been very welcome. Why did they leave? Like me, you can probably come up with some answers: they had someplace else to be, they didn't want to interrupt, they didn't feel like they were dressed appropriately, they weren't interested.

Now this is a modest example of people separating themselves from a religious gathering, but we all know people who, in a much larger fashion, separate themselves from God. This morning, we are going to talk about "separation from God" stories and learn more about God's absolute dedication to us.

When I was 16, my grandmother fell down a flight of stairs and was severely injured. During that time, my 22-year-old first cousin, Gary, prayed diligently that our grandmother would survive. She lived with Gary's family, so she was, to him, more like a mother. Grandma passed away two weeks after her fall, and because his prayers went unanswered, Gary turned away from God.

In the magazine *Christianity Today*, I read the story of Pamela Perillo. Pamela ran away from her abusive family when she was just thirteen years old. She met and married a 19-year-old heroin addict. Things did not turn out well, as you might imagine. Eventually, Pamela and some other people, high on drugs, murdered a man in Houston for his roll of cash. She was given the death sentence. In Pamela's own words, she stated "I thought God could never love a murderer."

Both Gary and Pamela became separated from God. Psychologist and religious counselor, Dr. David Grudermeyer, says that he has become familiar with what he calls "separation from God stories." He says there are several reasons we can become separated from God, and I'd like to share some of those reasons with you and tell you what scripture says about that separation or distance.

Pamela Perillo bought in to a Separation story called the Punishment Version. It's the "I did something wrong, and God is angry with me, or God hates me." This version is illustrated in story of Adam and Eve. You, of course, know this story. The God of Genesis comes down hard on Adam and Eve, and all this because they ate fruit from a forbidden tree. I mean, if God severely punished people for disobeying one rule about eating, how could he still love a murderer like Pamela?

My cousin, Gary, ascribed to the Arrogance Version. Gary thought he knew best what our Grandma's outcome should be. Surely Gary's solution was better and wiser than God's. Grandma should live, but she didn't. What did God know? Gary would do life without the Lord.

So now we've heard the Punishment and the Arrogance versions of separation stories. Let's move on to three more. I've selected these three because they are the versions I hear about most. Perhaps you do, too.

Number three is the Disinterest Version. God doesn't have time for you. You are irrelevant to God. I once asked a co-worker if she had prayed about getting a promotion that she wanted and felt she

deserved. "Uh, no," she replied. "I figure God is dealing with famine, forest fires, wars; things like that. God doesn't care what my job title is or if I get a raise. That has to be pretty trivial to God." Hmm... so God is disinterested.

A fourth separation story for people is the Mistake Version. Perhaps the folks who didn't join in with us at Waveny thought, "Whoa, I'm just here by mistake. I don't belong here. I don't understand what's going on." This version is particularly common with people who feel that they are forced to go to church because of expectations of family members, friends, or their community. They close themselves off to a relationship with God because it's a mistake that they are there at all.

So now we've learned about these versions for separation from the Lord: Punishment, Arrogance, Disinterest, and Mistake. The last version is perhaps the most common. It's the Irrelevant Version. God is irrelevant. God doesn't exist.

The God Is Dead movement arose in the United States during the 1960s. I know I'm not the only one here today who is old enough to remember that. The movement evoked prolonged attention, much response, and considerable controversy. Basic to that theory is the idea that belief in God is impossible or meaningless in the modern world and that fulfillment is to be found in secular life. Find fulfillment in secular life?

I recently had a conversation with Carol Bauer, whom you know is a chaplain at Norwalk Hospital. One day this summer when she was working, there were five babies born. Not one of their parents had a religious affiliation.

Most pastors in American churches would tell you that 40 to 60 percent of their congregation are not regular church attenders. Both Gallup and Pew polls show us that at least 11% of Americans do not believe in God. So much distance...

I've discussed some of the separation stories that people tell, but let's move on to scripture to see what the Bible tells us. Laura read some powerful New Testament this morning from Paul's letter to the Romans, and the words bear repeating:

31 If God is for us, who can ever be against us?

34 Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us.

38 And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, [b] neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. 39 No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Do you see the difference between what we think and what scripture tells us? Just like Adam and Eve, we can choose to disobey God. Why this is true no one knows for sure. Contrary to popular opinion, the Bible does not teach that we are born pre-programmed to disobey God. The Bible simply states that we "all have done things that are wrong and are continually falling behind and in need of glory from God" (Romans 3:23). In another passage from the book of Isaiah we learn that "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way..." (Isaiah 53:6). The Bible doesn't say why we

disobey God, it just states factually that we all fail Him.

We can choose through our actions and thoughts to be separate from God, but God will never choose to be separate from us. That's the takeaway today. Nothing can separate us from the Love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. And by the way, Pamela was led to the Lord through another inmate, her sentence was commuted to life in prison, and she is on fire for the Lord for others who are incarcerated. Gary was led back to the Lord by his third, and now long-time, wife.

In closing, here's something I heard a couple of years ago on NPR. Visitors to Coventry Cathedral in England are greeted with an unexpected sign as they enter.

"We extend a special welcome to those who are single, married, divorced, widowed, straight, gay, confused, filthy rich, comfortable, or dirt poor. We especially welcome wailing babies and excited toddlers. We welcome you whether you can sing like Pavarotti or just growl quietly to yourself. You're welcome here if you're just browsing, just woken up or just got out of prison. We don't care if you're more Christian than the Archbishop of Canterbury or haven't been to church since Christmas 10 years ago. We extend a special welcome to those who are over 60 but not grown up yet and to teenagers who are growing up too fast.

We welcome keep-fit moms, football dads, starving artists, tree huggers, latte sippers, vegetarians, junk food eaters. We welcome those who are in recovery or still addicted. We welcome you if you're having problems, are down in the dumps or don't like organized religion. We offer welcome to those who think the Earth is flat, work too hard, don't work, can't spell, or are here because Granny is visiting and wanted to come to the cathedral. We welcome those who are inked, pierced, both or neither.

We offer a special welcome to those who could use a prayer right now, had religion shoved down their throats as kids, or got lost in the city center and wound up here by mistake. We welcome pilgrims, tourists, seekers, doubters and ...and YOU."

Now that's scripture in action. The words say nothing can separate you from this church. We don't expect perfection, and neither does God.

If self-talk is keeping you or someone you know from God, if you have five or fifty-five versions of why there is a distance between you and God, you're in luck. Jesus is there at God's right hand, pleading for you and me. We have an advocate who will never give up on us.

Amen