

## **Sermon at FMC, “Transcendent Hope”**

**Donna’s Licensing**

**Feb. 15, 2015**

**By Ruth Johnston**

Once again from Romans 8:

“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 Jesus Christ our Lord.”

As a chaplain, these words are very familiar to me because I have often turned to them as I stood with a family at the bedside of a loved one who has died. I know that other chaplains, including Donna, have shared that they also turn to this same scripture. This morning I am going to reflect on the important role of this Romans 8 text, as it has related to my work as a hospital chaplain and as it speaks to the human heart in general.

In my ministry, I have chosen to use this scripture for a number of reasons. First of all, because it conveys to those standing in the face of death, that death itself cannot divide us off from God. In fact nothing can separate us from the love of God—including even the family’s own overwhelming feelings of grief, anger, and despair. The list Paul gives of things that cannot separate us is broad and long ending with “anything in all creation.” In this text we hear that there is nothing, visible or invisible, that’s powerful enough to turn God’s love away from us.

I have also chosen this scripture because of the vigor with which it is said. I find the sense of conviction in it to be reassuring at a time when those listening are not in need of a theological discussion, but are in need of a transcendent hope they can claim. As one commentator put it, “This is Paul’s victory song of salvation.” Paul says, “He is convinced” and his words are convincing.

Undoubtedly, I turn to these words from Paul because I believe them myself. If I didn’t, I don’t believe that I could share them with much integrity. I have had the personal experience of receiving God’s love despite my own brokenness, in the midst of my own brokenness, and out of that, like Paul, I am also convinced nothing turns God away. Because if anything could turn God away, I probably would have managed to do it by now.

Another strength of this Romans passage is that along with offering us reassurance, it does not avoid the reality of suffering. One belief that many of us in this culture seem to carry, is that if we have faith, and believe in God’s love, we will not have to suffer. Many people face their own physical, and emotional pain with a sudden sense of abandonment by God. Suffering seems to be a sign that God’s love for us has vanished. And maybe this is somehow a natural human response, considering that even Jesus at his dying moment says, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” When we suffer, a dark veil can obscure God’s presence. Paul’s words seem to contradict all thoughts of God’s abandonment. He does not say that we will not suffer because God loves us, but rather that even though we suffer, it will not separate us from God’s

love. We will suffer, and, God is with us. In a way, this passage “normalizes” our suffering instead of stigmatizing it. We all suffer at some time or another, in one way or another. It is not shameful, it is not sinful, it does not mean we are forsaken by God. But rather it is part of the human condition and God enters in, with steadfast love.

As a chaplain with a family at the moment of death, with this text I am remembering a relationship with God. Sometimes I am reading these words to people who know very little about the spiritual life, sometimes I am reading this to folks who are deeply faith-filled. Either way, a chaplain’s presence is requested because there is some desire for God’s love, and we are called upon to put flesh and bones to that love and that relationship as best we can.

Paul writes his letter to the Romans to bring together a diverse Christian community of Jews and Gentiles. In the Roman church there were tensions between groups, Paul’s message to the church is that all people are offered the Gospel message, God is in relationship with all. As a chaplain, and more broadly as Christians, we are also called upon to bring forth this kind of radical acceptance for those we meet, to remind anyone who is seeking spiritual companionship that God desires a relationship with every one of us, bar none.

In my own hospital experience there have been special moments which were particularly moving. Moments I will probably never forget. Each of these has an element of searching for that relationship with a loving God. Paul asks the question rhetorically, “Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” “Will hardship or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword?” But I have also heard this question, this desire not to be separated from God come up out of the human heart, as a pressing need. “Is God with me?” “Will God accept me?”

From a man about to have open heart surgery who in his fear asked me, the chaplain, in all earnestness, “Are you my connection to God?”

From a young man recently returned from war in Iraq, who told me about how he had killed,” and stricken, asked, “am I going to hell?”

From a middle aged woman in the throes of an addiction she seemed unable to escape, who asked straight out, “is there any hope?”

Sometimes these questions leap out from behind eyes that convey deep levels of loneliness and fear. They emerge from people who, like all of us, need to be seen and heard, to be loved and accepted. Paul’s heart-felt conviction about God’s pervasive and all-inclusive love sometimes gives us actual words to share. But even if it is not the right moment for sharing scripture, Paul conveys to us, to all who minister—to all of us, that hope and love are ours for the asking from a loving God, and he helps anchor us in a conviction that gives us the courage to walk alongside those who are suffering.

This morning our sister, Donna, is getting licensed for ministry. A ministry she has already been engaged in, that brings her into regular connection with people who are hurting in one way or

another. One of the many blessings of providing ministry is the opportunity to touch into the human spirit. Scripture helps us in our ministry, and our ministry brings scripture alive with deepened understanding based on what has been termed “the living human document” –the human Spirit. When any of us minister to others, we provide presence and care and we are moved and changed in the midst of that. As I have often told families who thank me for my presence with them, it is an honor to walk with others in this way. Today we celebrate with Donna her gifts for ministry. May God bless her, strengthen, comfort, and guide her all along the way.