



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Chasing Moon River

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ OCTOBER 3, 2021

What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? ³²Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else? ³³Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one—for God himself has given us right standing with himself. ³⁴Who then will condemn us? No one—for 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.

³⁵Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? ³⁶(As the Scriptures say, "For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.") ³⁷No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

³⁸And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. ³⁹No 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.

Romans 8:31-39 (NLT)

Searching for Security

The 1961 film *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, based on a Truman Capote novel, was a star-maker for actress Audrey Hepburn. She played Holly Golightly, a beautiful but lost and confused young socialite trying to find her way in cosmopolitan and sophisticated Manhattan. She became disillusioned by the constant whirl of parties and of men (all of whom wanted to use her but none offered genuine love). She was actually just a small-town girl from rural west Texas, orphaned as a child and taken in by a family; but she ran away in her late teens seeking excitement. She was desperate to, as she put it, "live life." But the big city, for all its glamour, was pretty bruising and unfulfilling.

A young man moved into her apartment building and offered her friendship without strings attached. She was drawn to his kindness, reminding her of her only brother whom she hadn't seen in years. But she was also afraid to trust a man; and so she went through a cycle of being drawn to him for the security, and then pushing him away out of fear that she'd be hurt. Finally, at the end of the film, he was able to convince her that his caring for her was genuine and unconditional, and that she could give up the relentless pursuit of pleasure and excitement and allow herself to be wrapped in security. It was a touching closing scene, as he embraced her in the rain and the theme song "Moon River" played in the background. The enigmatic dream of the song is that one day, if we can cross a river "wider than a mile" of life's hurts and disappointments and sorrows, perhaps we'll find on the other side a place of safety and peace with a true "huckleberry friend" who loves us without restraint.

The film and its song have become cultural classics, not only because they captured the swinging style of 1960s New York, but also because they resonate with the deepest of human impulses. We have all felt the inner tug-of-war between freedom and security, between our pride and its drive to make our own way, and our fears that we won't be strong enough or good enough to endure life's challenges. Our ego, and the messages of the world around us, tell us that we have to earn people's respect and affection. But the still-alive child in

us is still very aware of our weakness and inadequacy, and what that part of us most wants is to be loved and accepted unconditionally, without the relentless and impossible pressures of having to continually earn it.

The True Human Condition

The culmination of our worship today will be the timeless symbol of the Sacrament of Holy Communion. And in preparation for that, we will reflect for a few minutes on the great theme of the Love of God. It is the truth the Book of Romans builds toward—the way a great symphony builds to its crescendo, or Fourth of July fireworks lead to the breathtaking grande finale, or the Super Bowl game leads to the presentation of the Lombardi Trophy. To appreciate how much we need the unconditional love of God, and what a difference it can make in our lives, Paul (the author of Romans) walks us through our true human condition.

Beginning in the first chapter, he tells us that our deep unhappiness and lack of fulfillment comes from our repeated decision to chase after and “worship” other gods, created things, and pleasures and experiences, rather than letting the clear guidance of our Creator lead us into the right path. Then, especially as we get to chapter 7, Paul shines his flashlight of truth into our dark inner corners, revealing that we are a mix of conflicting and competing desires. Like Audrey Hepburn’s unhappy character, we think what we need to make us whole is freedom, excitement and fun, doing whatever we feel like doing. But there’s another part of us that we can never completely stifle or ignore: our conscience, that voice implanted within by our Creator that keeps calling us and wooing us back to Him.

The Apostle pleads with us, winsomely and logically and powerfully, to recognize our errors. Quit trying to substitute something else for the true God, he reasons. And quit letting your fickle and untrustworthy wants and desires control you. Come back to God your Creator, who is also your Father and Lover and Friend. He is constantly waiting, His arms outstretched.

A Love that Liberates

And so we come to the end of chapter 8. Paul gives us the greatest reason of all to return to God: because He will give us a security nothing can take away, He will make us whole wherever we have been broken, and His love will protect us and liberate us forever.

Let me offer an ineloquent and simple paraphrase of today's scripture text:

God's love for us is the most amazing, astounding thing in all the world. He will never stop loving us. He proved that by becoming a Man, dying for us on the cross, and then defeating death so that we could be with Him forever. And when the inevitable troubles of mortal life come—of all different kinds—we are not alone in facing them. He will bring us through them to a final victory. And everything our hearts have ever longed for will finally be ours with Him.

Tragically, this profound message has been heard and dismissed by many—at least for a period of their lives. Perhaps that's the personal story of some of you. Like Holly Golightly, who ran away from the only secure home she had known to try to "live life," many today are still following false gods or surrendering to the self-centered desires Paul identified in Romans. They think that unbridled and unconstrained freedom is the only path to happiness.

The irony is that, when we turn our back on God's love, we never get what we think we really want; but if we turn towards Him and receive Him we discover that our fears are groundless. He does not offer love to us in order to control us or use us. His love is intended to liberate us. When we are completely secure in Him, only then can we enjoy the greatest blessings in life without fear.

Romans 8:39 says, "Nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord." Nothing can separate you from God's love except you. You can run away. You can turn your back on Him. He created you with a will and a capacity to choose, with all the consequences for good or bad that your choices bring. But until your final breath, He waits for you with open arms.

A Distant Peak

A year ago I came upon a 30-year-old book by Christian author Peter Kreeft that opened my eyes a bit wider to what I'm sharing with you today. Entitled *The God Who Loves You*, it gave me a greater view, a bigger perspective. It was as if, like a small-town boy a century ago, I was looking through the knothole of a fence at a circus parade going by, seeing only a small portion. Kreeft's book pulled the whole plank off the fence so that I could poke my head through and see more.

The phrase "God loves you" has seemed like a well-worn cliché. We smile, and nod, and yawn. We assume everybody knows that. But we don't. It's exactly the opposite: We have no idea what that really means, in all its vastness. Most people through the generations have been able to figure out, by logic and the intricacy and of the created universe, that there must be a God. But what we could never know by our limited observation is what the character of that God is. When a Man appeared 2,000 years ago to reveal to us that the very nature of the universe and its Creator is LOVE, it was a shock. It still is, whenever we try to truly grasp it.

I do not profess to be an expert in loving God, nor am I able to see Him completely as He is. The Bible is the most accurate image of Him available to us. And many other men and women of our own time and previous centuries have understood and loved Him more.

So, why do I presume to tell you about the incredible love of God? I know my words are inadequate. I might as well try to stuff the sun into a suitcase, or drain the ocean with a coffee mug, as to presume to describe the vast and unlimited love at the heart of our Heavenly Father. Why, then, do I speak to you about this? Because, although other pilgrims have climbed much higher on the mountain than I have, I can still see the distant peak clearly enough from down here on the plain. And so I direct your attention with me. Though there is a long way to go, that is our destination. One day we will see more. One day, if we choose to move towards Him now, we will be so wrapped in His love that nothing else will matter.

And along that pilgrim road He offers us regular spiritual sustenance. That's what Holy Communion is meant to be. It renews and strengthens us. It reminds us that nothing can ever separate us from the One who loves us unconditionally and completely. It enables us to face and overcome every challenge, while we appreciate every blessing. ■

