

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Pentecost 11 – August 25th and 28th, 2011

Romans 8:35-39

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels or demons, neither the present or the future, not any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Dear children of God who know Christ's love. Amen

I'm sure you've all heard about one of the newest movies, Captain America. This movie has certainly continued the current Hollywood trend of putting out movies based on comic book superheroes. First there were the Superman movies, then there were the four or five Batman movies, there are three Spiderman movies, then there was also the Green Lantern, The Fantastic Four, and Iron Man. And I apologize if I missed your favorite superhero's movie. There's been quite a few.

But why have these movies been so popular? Well, for one thing, we love our superheroes, don't we? We love the way they leap tall buildings in a single bound. We love the way they get themselves out of the most dangerous situations. We love the way they overcome the most difficult challenges. We love them because they are able to do things that regular people can't do.

We love them because we don't always save the day. We don't always get the girl. We live in a world where good does not always triumph over evil. We live in a real world, a world which is far different from a movie. And life in the real world is sometimes hard. Life in the real world isn't always fair, and we don't always get what we want.

And that was true for the Apostle Paul in his day. But that didn't cause him to write about some imaginary superhero. No instead listen to the words of confidence and conviction from flowing from his pen. Listen to him praising his God and Savior. Listen to him encouraging others to do the same.

Dear friends, we may not possess any supernatural abilities. We may not have superhuman strength. Let's face it, we are not superheroes. But according to Paul we are something even better. No, we may not be superheroes, but through Jesus...

Sermon Theme: We Are Conquerors!

- 1. Life in this world creates doubts**
- 2. Nothing can separate us from God's love**

I'll explain that more a little later, but first, our text begins with a question: **“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?”** But this question doesn't stand by itself. It is actually the last in a series of hypothetical questions that Paul asks beginning in verse 31. Let's take a quick look at those questions to get Paul's whole line of thought here.

Question #1: **“What shall we say in response to this?”** In other words, what more needs to be said after God's wonderful promise to work all things out for the good of those who love God? This is Paul's unspoken answer: **“NOTHING.”**

Question #2: **“If God is for us, who can be against us?”** Since we are on God's side, or even better, since God is on our side, who poses a threat to our eternal future? If you read between the lines you can hear Paul say: **“NO ONE.”**

Question #3: **“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”** Since God spared no expense to meet our greatest need – that of a Savior, don’t you think he will also take care of every lesser need in our lives? Paul’s line of reasoning allows for only one answer: **“OF COURSE HE WILL.”**

Question #4: **“Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns?”** Paul says since God has called us to be his own from eternity, since God has washed away our sins with the blood of his Son, who has any right to condemn us? The obvious answer: **“NO ONE.”**

And that brings us up to the question in our text: **“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?”** Paul could have answered with a simple, clear and emphatic, **“NO ONE,”** but he didn’t. Instead he modified the question, making the hypothetical more personal: **“Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?”**

These questions were going along so nicely. People were no doubt reading this and responding to every question going, **“Yeah, Yeah, Yeah!”** But then this. Paul lists here seven real dangers that believers have to deal with. Real dangers to our souls. Real dangers to our eternal life. And it makes us think harder, is there anything that can separate us from the love of Christ?

Paul implies with this question that these things are going to be present in the lives of believers. In fact, he assumes they will. Maybe not all of them, maybe not all to the same degree, but if you are a believer, Paul writing under inspiration of the Holy Spirit knows that you will have to deal with these things.

So will you be able to handle them? Could trouble, hardship, persecution, (just the first three of the seven that Paul mentions) make it difficult at times to remain for you to remain a Christian? Could they potentially separate you from the love of Christ? I suppose. Just think how your faith has wavered when trouble has come into our lives – when we’ve tried living our Christian convictions in a world where those Christian convictions are ridiculed. And think how our faith has stumbled when we’ve endured hardship on account of it. Like when we feel all alone because of our faith, alone even when we’re among family and friends. And what about persecution? How has your faith handled that? What did you feel like when people say how can you believe what you do? How can you believe in creation when all the evidence points to evolution? How can you say your God is loving when bad things happen? Etc.

Just think how many times our faith has wavered under assaults from just the first three things there in Paul’s list. And when I included persecution, we’re not talking about physical persecution, so really we’re talking just about the first 2 ½ things on Paul’s list. Just think how those things can potentially damage our relationship with our God! Maybe those things can separate us from his love?

What if we then, heaven forbid, had to go through physical persecution, or had to endure famine, nakedness, danger or the sword? What if you or your family went hungry because of what you believe? What if your faith in Jesus put you in a life-threatening situation? What if someone pointed a gun to your head and demanded: **“Deny Jesus or die!”**

Thankfully, we haven’t had to undergo those types of attacks on our faith, but there are Christians who have! There are places where Christians are forced to meet in secret. Places where people are not allowed to wear Christian jewelry. Places where it is against the law to speak the name of Jesus in public. But just because we haven’t undergone those types of attacks on our faith doesn’t mean that the attacks we have undergone are any less dangerous. They aren’t. They all serve the same purpose – to separate us from the love of Christ.

In Paul’s day, many of the attacks came via the pagan Roman society – a society that ridiculed the idea that there was just one true God. Today, many of the attacks on our faith come via a secular society – a society that ridicules even the idea of a god. But no matter what age Christians live in, no matter where in the world they live, no matter what form the attacks on their faith take, all Christians are going to have their faith attacked. That was Paul’s point when he quoted Psalm 44: **“As it is written: ‘For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’”**

If you are Christian, Paul says you should expect to have our faith persecuted and attacked! That just goes with having faith in sinful world. But Paul doesn’t say this to make us lose heart. He wants us to know

that these difficulties aren't coming our way as punishment, but rather as proof. They are proof that we are up against powerful enemies who have only goal: to separate us from the love of Christ. But they are also proof that we have an even more powerful ally.

All the comic book superheroes had their enemies that they would have to fight. Christians are no different. We are up against this sinful world, our own sinful nature and of course the mastermind behind all the attacks on our faith, the devil himself. But we're no superhero. We can't stand up against these enemies on our own and defeat them. They are too powerful. But yet we still win. We win because of our powerful ally, Jesus Christ. Yes, because of him we will be super-victors.

When describing a victory, the Greek language has a couple of different words, one is *nike* – from where that ever popular shoe brand takes its name. But there is another word that Paul uses here – a word found nowhere else in his letters and nowhere else in the entire New Testament. It describes not just a victory, but a severely lop-sided victory. He writes, **“In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”** In spite of our present problems, in spite of our powerful enemies, we are victors. Because of Jesus we are conquerors.

Listen now as the excitement flows from Paul's pen: **“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** What does Paul want us to know? What comfort do these words give? Paul wants us to know that there is no creature, no dimension, no person, no power, no problem, absolutely nothing in all of creation that can pry us out of the arms of the God who loves us.

And it's not because we're superheroes. No it's because we have an ally who is a superhero of sorts – Jesus Christ. But he is far more than a superhero – he is our Savior. He defeated our enemies by living a perfect life and then dying for our sins. I guess you could say he is the superhero of superheroes. And what does that make us? Well because Jesus died in our place, we are victors. Because he rose from the dead, we are victors. Because he ascended to prepare our places in heaven, we are victors. Because Jesus is on our side, we are more than conquerors.

Superman had his red cape. Spiderman had his web. Batman sported a yellow utility belt. What do we have? What is our trademark? Where does our power come from? Isn't it obvious? It's Jesus' cross. What was once considered a symbol of shame and ridicule is now the sign of our greatest triumph. It was there that Jesus defeated sin and death and Satan. We may not get to go through life as a superhero, but because of Jesus, we do get to go through this life, and the next, as conquerors. Amen.