

Let God's Love Flow Here
Romans 8:38-39
October 15, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine



Take a look at the image above. When I first moved into my office, just over three years ago, this picture was taped to the door. Obviously, it was created by one of the children of this church, but I don't know which one. I have loved this image since I laid eyes on it, so I framed it and hung it where I can see it every day from my desk.

"God Loves You," it says. Sometimes that is just so obvious! When the sun shines and everything is working perfectly in my life, it is easy to remember that God loves me. But sometimes I need a reminder, just as we all do. In those weeks when someone in the congregation is ill, and someone in the community has died, and there are three committee meetings, and Sunday worship still needs to be prepared, I need to be reminded that God love me, and we will get through this. When war breaks out, we need to remember God's love, not just for us but for all of God's children. It is God's love we share here, not just our own. So, we fill ourselves with God's love on Sunday morning and then go out into the world to spread it around. "God Loves You," the picture says. "God Loves You."

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This morning's scripture passage is my very favorite in the whole Bible, and so, I am delighted that we got to hear it last week as the Word of Assurance and again this morning as our focus passage. Paul is writing to the church in Rome. Paul's other letters are to churches that he, himself, had established. But in this letter, he is writing to an existing church that he wants to visit, to introduce himself, to explain his understanding of the faith, and eventually to solicit their help in funding his planned trip to Spain, to establish churches there. So, in a sense, the Book of Romans is an extended stewardship letter – a reminder of the faith we share and a gentle ask for support.

It is a difficult time for Christians in the Roman world. Paul mentions persecutions, peril, sword, and slaughter. To profess faith in Jesus as the risen Lord in Paul's world is to walk on a very thin tight rope indeed. Paul urges his readers to profess their faith anyway, to claim it proudly, because our ultimate allegiance is not to the rulers of this world, but to God. Our true citizenship is not in this world, but in God's world, surrounded and filled by God's love, sustained by God's love, conquering through God's love.

Nothing, Paul says, nothing in all the world can separate us from the love of God. Death cannot separate us from God's love, Paul writes, nor the dailyness of life. No angel in heaven and no ruler on earth can keep God from loving us. Nothing that stresses us right now, and nothing that we fear in the future. Nothing in all Creation. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

"God Loves You," the picture says. Paul couldn't have said it better himself.

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We are called to be the Body of Christ in Center Harbor, New Hampshire, population 1,100. But let's say that our community extends beyond Center Harbor, to include Meredith, population 6,415, and Moultonborough, population 4,161. That's a little over 11,000 year-round residents that we serve, plus summer visitors, and on any given Sunday morning, 36 of those people show up here to worship. Hallelujah! I hope everyone who walks through our doors feels God's love here. But what about the people who don't walk through our doors? What do they know of God's love from us?

Well, most people think of our church as the building itself, this classic white New England church overlooking the lake. One of Pam's neighbors told her, "That is the church I would go to ... IF I went to church." And they do come here in times of need. When the time comes, we don't just bury our own church members. We offer God's grace at the end of life to anyone in our community who asks for it. People who never, ever come to worship on Sunday morning think of this as their church in times of greatest distress. They count on us to show God's love when they need it most. Our building is the only community center in town, so AA meets here, and Al-Anon, and Humble Grunt Works. Children learn about themselves and about nature in our pre-school. Our own children bring their friends to church to learn about God. Our building is our most visible – and most expensive – ministry. God's love flows through us to our community through our presence in this beautiful corner of Creation.

Hungry people are fed here. About 40 people receive a hot meal each week from our back door. The people at the community food pantries in Meredith and Moultonborough receive bags and bags of food each year from us. Hungry neighbors can get food from our own little free pantry. I met a man once out by the pantry. He was embarrassed to be seen, I think. I was restocking the pantry when he arrived, and I offered to bring out more for him to choose from. He declined, but he said, "Your church does good work here." God's love flows through us to hungry people in our community.

We support lots of local ministries. We have long had a covenant relationship with Habitat for Humanity, which we support with our gifts each summer. College students at Plymouth State University who want to explore their faith can find like-minded souls at the campus ministry there. We support that. Families experiencing domestic violence can find a playground at the emergency shelter that we helped to build. We support those in need who live a long way from us, too, people we will never meet. Last year, this little church gave over \$3,000 to UCC offerings that assist refugees. This year we gave to wildfire response in Hawaii and we collected \$700 in loose change and bills in a big pickle jar, that will purchase and forgive up to \$70,000 in crushing medical debt for low- and middle-income families in New Hampshire. They won't know who gave that money, but we do, and God does. God's love flows through this little church in our gifts.

Our rainbow flag declares that all are welcome here, and each year there are people who choose to worship with us because we are Open and Affirming. This week, our sign declares that we stand by our Jewish neighbors. We put that up after a terrible incident of hate-filled, antisemitic graffiti was found at the Laconia State School. It has a little different meaning this week, after Hamas's attack on Israel. I heard from one of you that a member of the community really appreciated seeing our sign, because she has family members who are Jewish. God's love flows through this church to people who are marginalized in our community and in our world.

We pray for those we love, and we pray for people we have never met. During the COVID pandemic, a family from Sandwich asked that we pray for their daughter who was in the hospital and not expected to live. They said they wanted our prayers because we are known to be a praying church. I think I prayed that God would be with her at this sacred time, and be the breath of life for her. Amazingly, she recovered. Our prayer group prays fervently every week for anyone who asks for prayer. God's love flows through our prayers to our community and the wider world.

Paul says that there is nothing that can separate us from God's love, so certainly there is nothing we could possibly do that would keep God from loving the people of Center Harbor and Meredith and Moultonborough. But what we do here can help spread that love farther and faster. The work we do here is God's work. If I didn't believe that, I wouldn't be here. And so, it is a joy for me to participate in God's work in this church with both my time and my financial pledge. It takes both to keep the church here, doing all the things that make God's love known in this community.

“God Loves You,” one of our children wrote. God loves everyone in this church and everyone in our community. And we are a conduit for that love. Next week, we will dedicate our pledges for 2024. I hope you give prayerful consideration to your pledge to support God’s work in this church next year, and if you can, I hope you will join me in increasing your pledge, so that everyone who walks through our door, and all our neighbors who are hungry or needing prayer or grieving or ready to praise God with us, all of them will know that God’s love flows here.

Amen