

## This We Know: Promises for People of Faith & Doubt *You Belong*

Romans 8:31-39

June 16, 2024

It has been fifteen years since Bill Bishop and Robert Cushing, sociologists who live and write in central Texas, published their book titled *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart*. Their conclusion, after much sociological and demographic research, is this: Americans seem to be sorting themselves, socially and geographically, on the basis of ideology and political identity. Perhaps more importantly, their insight was that this kind of sorting intensifies incivility, solidifies stereotypes, drives division, and degrades our discourse. In the years since the book's publication, the trend has become clearer and its implications more obvious. Increasingly, it is possible to live your entire life in a bubble of like-mindedness. On its face this may not be such a bad thing, but the danger of this condition is the extremism that results from never having to question your assumptions or broaden your perspective, of living in a so-called community defined only by unanimity and uniformity. We have seen the charged rhetoric and even the violence that such sorting encourages and enables. This kind of sorting raises a question that people of faith have been wrestling with for centuries. What kind of community do we want to build? Where do we draw the boundary lines of acceptance and inclusion? Perhaps most to the point: who belongs?

In many ways, this is the question faced by the Apostle Paul as he sat down and put pen to parchment to draft a letter to the Christians living in Rome. The congregation there was like our own congregation, made up of people from very different backgrounds, believers who were shaped by strongly held convictions that did not always align with those of their neighbors in the pews. This is not breaking news, but you are not currently in a like-minded bubble. Second Church remains blessedly unsorted.

For Paul, the possibility that those differences might divide the church and drown out the message of the gospel was a real and present danger. He knew that people were looking across the sanctuary with suspicion. Under their breath or in the parking lot after worship, they wondered aloud, "Do *they* belong *here* with *me*? I mean, just look at how they live! Just look at what they eat! Just look at whom they befriend, where they come from, how they vote!"

In response to these questions hovering in the air and the tension that they bring to the surface, Paul responds with wisdom and passion. *Behind* those questions, Paul senses a deeper anxiety at work. And so, Paul responds with his very best—the Letter to the Romans.

In a time when the Christian faith is often distorted, when the church is struggling with a sense of identity and too often capitulates to the forces of division at work in the world around us, we need to hear again what mattered most to Paul, and we will find it in the eighth chapter of Romans. Here, Paul's words provide three promises we need.

First, Paul lays out his unshakable faith in the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is God's way of being present in our lives and available to us, the bridge that connects us to God, often misidentified as coincidence or serendipity. Earlier in the chapter, Paul says that the Spirit of God helps us most when we need it most, when we are our weakest. Paul writes that the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. The Spirit speaks when our language will not suffice. Have you heard these sighs of the Spirit? I have heard them. I've heard them in hospital rooms at the bedside of a dying patient. Sighs too deep for words. I have heard them from a group of exhausted teenagers on the final

morning of a powerful youth conference. Sighs too deep for words. Those sighs are the Spirit interceding on our behalf when words will not come, bringing peace and comfort in the midst of overwhelming emotion. I think the Holy Spirit is often disguised as a lump in our throats, leaving us momentarily mute, quiet so that we might listen for the voice of God. Paul insists that the Spirit is present.

For Paul, however, God is not only accessible and near to us. God is also beyond us, sovereign, powerful, majestic. Paul uses words in Romans 8 like *purpose*, *foreknowledge*, *predestined*, and *called* to describe this conviction that God is the one in control here. And this is another word we need to add to the current Christian conversation because too often, I hear God described as if the divine were the puppet and we were the ones pulling the strings. Too often God is enlisted as a foot soldier in our battles. We call on God to justify our opinion and perspective. This is not Paul's picture of a sovereign God who transcends both our demands and our expectations. Friends, if you can put your God in a box, then your God is too small. Or as Presbyterian author Anne Lamott has brilliantly written, "You can safely assume that you have created God in your image when it turns out God hates all the same people you hate."<sup>ii</sup> Paul describes a different God, a God who is Lord of all—and that means all—before whom we are called to be humble, reverent, worshipful. We need to hear that conviction.

God is present and with us. God is powerful and beyond us.

But earlier, I suggested that Paul sensed a deeper anxiety behind the accusatory tone and the creeping division at work in the Roman Church. It is, I think, the same anxiety that lies behind the big sort driving us apart as a people and as a nation. Whenever we lash out at so-called enemies, whenever we belittle those who are different from us, whenever we lash out in anger or build walls of separation and cast aspersions through screens, these actions come from deeply unsettled places within us. And so, the question Paul

uncovers beneath the divisions that plague the Church is not "do *they* belong?" It is "do *I* belong?" In my experience as a pastor, the most bitter and resentful souls are also the least secure, and often the most wounded. All of us wonder at times, "Is there a place for me here? Do I belong?"

In response to this existential anxiety, Paul lays out his deepest conviction, so central that he repeats it again in the chapter. The conviction is this: that you belong to God, that there is nothing that can separate you from God's love in Jesus Christ. Paul's repetition discloses his conviction and also his appreciation for how difficult this truth can be to internalize and accept.

Some time ago now, I was eating lunch alone on a Thursday afternoon. This is a rare occasion for me. Just myself, a brand-new book, and a whole hour stretched out before me of unscheduled time. Seven minutes into that hour, the person at the table next to mine leaned over. "Man, whatever you're reading must be good. You've hardly looked up from it." She asked me about the book that I *had* been reading, and from there, the questions just kept coming. Finally, she asked the question I most dreaded. What do you do for a living? Before you, my congregation, I confess to considering my options on this one. But reluctantly, I told her. "Oh, then I have another question for you!"

Just in case, I tried to remember the five tenets of Calvinist theology and which Protestant beliefs were deemed heretical at the 16th Century Council of Trent. Neither of those topics came up. "Well, she said, "There is this pastor on TV. He bottles holy water and sends it out to people who need to get right with God. It's \$29.95. Now, look. I've made some mistakes in my life, and the truth is I've made some big ones. I've tried to get my life together. I go to a church. I read the Bible and pray. But the preacher on TV says that God asks more, requires more. I don't know if I am right with God, and so I'm thinking about ordering some of the water. Pastor, what do think?"

*What do I think?* I think, and I have staked my whole life on the belief, that Paul was right. That the promise we proclaim at baptism is true, and that the water of baptism is the only water we will ever need. That there is nothing imaginable, including our own brokenness, that can separate us from the love of God. I think—I am absolutely convinced—that God’s love for us is stronger than anything.

But please hear this. If you feel separated from God by words spoken, mistakes made, abuse endured, judgment pronounced, opportunities unseized, anger harbored, forgiveness withheld, doubts that linger... If you feel separated from God by distance of time or space... Know this: that whatever aims to separate you from God is precisely what God intends to overcome, for God grants *nothing* the power to keep us from God.

Each Thursday morning for decades now, a group of men from Shallowford Presbyterian Church down in Atlanta have gathered at church at the crack of dawn, prepared breakfast, enjoyed fellowship and good food together. And then they pray with and for each other, offering their prayers out loud in turns around the table. Early in my time as their pastor, before the births of our two boys shifted my morning routine, I was a regular at Thursday morning prayer breakfast. And in that setting, I learned so much about that congregation—about its foundation and its history, its vision, and the deep value of relationships that form the heart of the place. The men’s prayer breakfast story that has impacted me most was not one that I experienced firsthand but heard about later. Ted Bayley was among the most visionary and committed leaders that church had in its first sixty years. He was also a faithful weekly member of the men’s prayer breakfast for as long as his health allowed. Ted suffered for years with dementia and Alzheimer’s Disease. Week after week, even as he was barely able to speak, Ted would walk from his house around the corner to the church to attend the Thursday morning breakfast. The story is that, after learning his diagnosis,

Ted came one Thursday morning, and at breakfast he prayed, “Dear God, my memory is failing and I’m afraid. I’m afraid I won’t recognize my friends before long or remember their names.” Raw, powerful prayer. Seated next to Ted, and so the next person to pray, was his dear friend Ed Carithers, another Shallowford saint and pillar. Ed grasped Ted’s hand and began his prayer this way, “Father God, please help Ted to know that even if he forgets who we are, we will always remember who he is.” That’s the church I want to build. The community I want to nurture.

And so, here is the promise we need to hear, to believe, to trust, and take to heart. God is present in sighs too deep for words. God is present in sovereign and powerful love. And you belong to God. No question marks. No caveats. No exceptions. No matter what. Amen.

<sup>i</sup> Bill Bishop and Robert G. Cushing, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart*. Mariner Press, 2009.

<sup>ii</sup> Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. Anchor Books, 1994. p. 22.