

United Methodist Church of Monroe
Monroe, CT
February 12, 2017
10:00 a.m. Service

Love Series: Sermon 4
“I Will Always Love You”

Text: Psalm 100 and Romans 8:35-39

*I hope life treats you kind
And I hope you have all you've dreamed of
And I wish you joy and happiness
But above all this I wish you love*

*And I... will always love you
I will always love you
I will always love you
I will always love you*

*I will always love you
I, I will always love you.*

Dolly Parton wrote these words, although we think of Whitney Houston singing it. Dolly wrote it about a professional breakup, not a personal one. It was 1973 and she was going solo which meant “breaking up” with her mentor, producer, and longtime duet partner, Porter Wagoner. How beautiful that although she was severing her professional relationship with him, she still wished him the best.

I will always love you. That is what we are promised by God. We are promised that no matter what, God’s love will never leave us. So, unlike Dolly and Porter, God won’t “break up” with us; but God does want us to have joy and happiness, and above all feel the love He has for us.

But, if this is so then why do we feel separated from God sometimes? There is a saying: “If God seems far away, guess who moved?” I’ve said that myself and agree that God does not leave us, but I wonder if that discounts the feelings that someone may have when they truly feel abandoned by God and don’t feel God’s love. Even Jesus felt separated from God—“*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me*” he cried while hanging on the cross.

I’ve heard this cry by a seminary student who felt her whole faith come crumbling down after her first course on the Bible.

I’ve heard this cry by a woman who laid in bed for years unable to heal from a disease that was ravaging her body.

I’ve heard this cry by a young couple who had dedicated their lives to God and the church when they could not conceive a child.

There are lots of us who have experienced the real pain and disappointment because of feeling separated by God and have cried out, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” Faithful people who have felt that despite prayers and, in spite of attempts to faithfully follow God, they still feel unloved. Dare I say there might even be folks right here in this room who have or are experiencing this right now.

In an article I read by modern theologian J.R. Daniel Kirk, he said that “any experience of emotional trauma can wreak havoc on your relationships, including your relationship with God.” And interestingly enough this can happen even more so when you are seeking to be faithful. Or maybe not so surprisingly, given that it was when Jesus was being the most faithful to God, giving his life for us, hanging on the cross, he experienced the weight of abandonment.

What can Paul teach us then? How can we reconcile all this so that we really hear the words “*I will always love you?*” Paul was treated brutally, he was under attack from all sides and spent time in and out of prison. In fact, in the book of Acts alone it speaks of at least eight murder attempts on Paul's life. Yet, he remained insistent: nothing in all of creation can separate me from God's love. I really like The Message interpretation of this Romans passage:

Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture:

None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I'm absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.

I think it's critical that when we experience those hard times, when we feel like our prayers are falling on deaf ears, when we feel that wedge between us and God that we share those feelings. Talking to someone you trust, being still and sharing it with God, even railing at God is good. It is only when we acknowledge our feelings and let it all out are we able to begin the healing process. One thing I do when I counsel people is remind them that suffering is not a sign of faithlessness or an indication that we are “out of God's will.” We all suffer and it's okay to acknowledge that you are feeling separated from God. In fact, it is more than okay, it is necessary in order to grow.

Knowing that we are not alone in the questioning is good too. God does say *I will always love you*. Even when we don't feel it, it's there. Even when we doubt, it's there. Even when we are depressed, it's there. It is through trusting, and praying, and crying, and sharing with others that we get through the rough spots.

The seminary student who cried out and felt her faith crumble began to be rebuilt as she took more classes and spent time in chapel and talking with others. She is now a strong pastor sharing her experiences with others. She knows that God will always love her.

The woman who railed against God from her bed was reconciled with God before her death. She began to share her doubt with others, her frustration and through reading some Psalms and prayers she was able to fully welcome Jesus into her heart and she felt certain before her death that she was going to the place that Jesus had promised. She knows that God will always love her.

The young couple, although sad that they were never able to have their own children, ended up being surrogate parents and then grandparents to the little children in their church. They loved playing, watching and teaching the little ones and realized that this was a gift that God had given them. They know that God will always love them.

I will always love you and I will never forsake you. God did not forsake Jesus, in fact, he raised him from the dead. We too will be raised. Nothing, not anything, real or imagined, no person, no thing, no entity can separate us from the love of God. If God is for us who can be against us? No one!

Amen!