

For the Love of God!
The Rev. Dr. June C. Goudey
Romans 8 (excerpts)
United Church of Christ in Simi Valley, July 27, 2008

The clarity of Paul's conviction is stunning! "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose." It would seem these words are indisputable, but many have misunderstood them. Meister Eckhart, a 13th century Dominican preacher, theologian, and mystic once admonished those who speak too easily about the ways of God. He wrote, "The most beautiful thing which a person can say about God, would be for that person to remain silent from the wisdom of an inner wealth." Then he adds, "So be silent and quit flapping your gums about God."

Preachers wiser than me might end their sermon on such a note and sit down, but I'll take the risk that when all is said and done the only thing I can be accused of flapping today is my heart. Despite their apparent clarity, Paul's words evoke doubt. Good people, people who believe they love God, who believe they are doing God's work are cut down in their prime. Martin Luther King, the Kennedy brothers, Mahatma Gandhi, and Oscar Romero come to mind; but there are others whose premature deaths stir in us haunting doubts about God's goodness and intentions.

In August 2003 "the top United Nations envoy in Iraq, Sergio Vieira de Mello, was killed when terrorists blew up the UN headquarters in Baghdad, killing at least 14 others and injuring dozens. The 55 year-old De Mello was a 30-year Brazilian veteran of many UN peacekeeping operations from the Balkans to East Timor to Africa." In 2006 Tom Fox, one of 4 Christian peacekeepers kidnapped in Iraq in Nov 2005, was found slain in Baghdad. His colleagues remembered him as a person who combined "a lightness of spirit, a firm opposition to all oppression, and the recognition of God in everyone." One can also add to this list the names of three nuns, Ita Ford, Maura Clarke, Dorothy Kazel, and lay woman Jean Donovan who were raped and murdered in El Salvador in 1980.

Every conflict in human history has produced fallen innocents amid the extremities of injustice. The genocide of native peoples, the Middle Passage of African blacks, the Jewish Holocaust, the suffering of post colonial Africa, the hatred of gays and lesbians, racism in all its ugliness, and the inequities of immigration, evoke unspeakable laments and disturbing doubts. Good God, how can this be? Others have been living examples of God's love to us in more personal ways. Good people, dear friends and loved ones now dead from accidents, disease, or self-inflicted wounds. Good God, we rage, how can this be?

Loving God can be a dangerous thing. Not because God is to be feared, or doubted, but because our loving so easily goes awry. Scripture tells us that God loves the world, but we too easily narrow that world to our own personal wants and needs. Then we justify ourselves and find God wanting. Our self-serving accusers [anti-immigration protesters] parading outside today think they know justice; yet I would argue that their words undermine the love of God. Those who scream, "God hates fags," or imply that God loves the unborn more than the mothers that carry them protest for the love of God; but whose God do they serve?

All of us need to ask ourselves the same question: whom do we serve? Whose purpose are we proclaiming? Whose love are we enacting? Paul proclaims that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. I believe this with all my heart. If we serve the teachings of Jesus, if we honor our neighbors, call no one our enemy, feed the hungry, visit those in prison, shelter the homeless, clothe the naked and welcome the stranger, God's love will be manifest.

The same is true if you follow Buddha, or Mohammed. Whatever teaching expands your heart and embodies compassion manifests a radical world openness that answers to many names. Jesus calls us to love God wholeheartedly and in the same breath he calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves. He is clear that self love is not the enemy of God but self-denial and self-righteousness surely follow a different path.

We know from the Good Samaritan story that religious people easily tend to self-righteousness. We also know that sexual abuse crimes are present in every religious tradition. Clerical collars like the one I wear today reflect religious authority, but religious authority no matter what faith tradition it honors is no guarantee that God's love is at work. To really appreciate God's love at work one must understand the role of equality and oneness. In Meister Eckhart's words, "Love will never be anywhere unless equality and unity are present. Between a master and his servant there is no peace because there is no real equality. There can be no love," he continues, "where love does not find equality or is not busy creating equality. Nor is there pleasure without equality." Practice equality in human society and love will make it self known. So Eckhart would have us "learn to love, esteem and consider all people as we would ourselves. What happens to another, be it bad or good, pain or joy ought to be as if it happened to you."

In the words of the late William Sloane Coffin, one of the great peacemakers and peace-workers of our time, "Love is visionary." I understand Coffin's words, like Paul's, to mean that love greatens us. Love calls us from the small inner worlds of our own meaning to the larger world of God's purpose; a purpose that continues to express itself where justice and mercy kiss in concrete human action, where like Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker Movement, we live the "long loneliness" of love with conviction, knowing that love requires "labor and fortitude."

Back to Paul's words: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose." The greater meaning of Paul's words, I believe, lies in his opening phrase, "We know that all things work together for good." Our lives have their deepest meaning when our yearnings, our actions, our deeds, are expressions of our oneness in the spirit and our equality in the Spirit. Whatever name you call Spirit by, it is your actions that reflect the wonder of your love for God and the nature of that love at work in the world. Ask yourself then if your loving manifests equality and oneness; and if not why not? As Coffin says, "When in anguish over any human violence done to innocent victims, we ask of God, 'How could you let this happen?' It is well to remember that God at every moment is asking the exact question of us."

Again in Coffin's words, "to show compassion for an individual without showing concern for the structures of society that make that individual an object of compassion is to be sentimental rather than loving." Today we find ourselves confronting numerous tragedies. Inequities of wealth abound, inequities in immigration policies abound, inequities of labor abound; the list is sadly endless and the greatest of these is inequities of power. It is not our task to question the motivation of others, no matter how righteous that makes us feel; nor is it our task to seek power for our own purpose. Our purpose must be aligned with the greater purposes of equality and oneness that express themselves in acts of justice and mercy. Our lives in the commonwealth of God, depend on our common health, our communal well-being; not our religious well-being but the well-being of all humanity. As Christians our call is to be visionaries, letting God's love soften our hearts, widen our embrace, and clarify our purpose.

The key to living a visionary life for the love of God, is to let the vision unfold daily, to let God speak daily, and to let ourselves be made new each and every day. We are called to be grasped by God's love and greatened by God's grace, and that my friends is day labor. Today I call you to embrace once again God's visionary love. If you have been baptized, I encourage you to come forward and bless yourself with the water in this bowl and reflect on your motivation and purpose. If baptism is not part of your tradition, I invite you to come forward and bless yourself as part of your tradition. If you wish to sit silently and not come forward, I ask you to simply bless those who do. If it is your wish, please come...

[after all have returned to their seats, the sermon continues]

Let Meir Ben Isaac Nehorai's poem be the final word:

“Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade,
To write the love of God above,
Would drain the ocean dry.
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky.”

Amen.