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THE LOVE FACTOR Michael B. Beough
Romans 8:28-39 June 1, 2008
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When I was in high school, I got an invitation from my neighbor to go fishing with him in his boat. We got up before daybreak and launched his boat in Cedar Bayou. Then we motored all the way out into Galveston Bay. He had a favorite fishing spot, he explained, out at the edge of some oyster beds. When we got to his spot, he told me to throw over the anchor. It was a shiny stainless steel affair and as I heaved it over the side, he told me that the guys he worked with in the shop at the refinery had made it for him as a gift.

Being anchored to our spot, so we thought, we started fishing hoping to catch some reds and maybe some speckled trout. I have never forgotten what happened next. My neighbor told me to check the anchor line because we were drifting. When I looked for the line, my heart sank. There was no line. There was no anchor. The only thing he said to me, the last thing he ever said to me, ever, was, "Why didn't you tie the anchor line to the boat? I can't believe you have lost my anchor. Without an anchor, we can't fish."

For the next few minutes, we went back and forth across the spot where he thought the anchor might be. Finally, he turned toward home and gunned the engine in obvious anger.

Anchors are so important. And yet how many people have thrown their anchors over the side? How many people are fishing for life in the wrong spot because they have no anchors? How many of us try to navigate the storms of life without anchors to hold us fast?

About a year ago, we started a process to help us as a church identify what we call our bedrock beliefs. These are the beliefs that we fall back on when times are tough, when life throws us a curve, when circumstances knock us down. They are the bottom we touch when we start to sink. They are beliefs that sustain us. They hold us steady. They keep us where we need to be to fish. They are like anchors for the soul.

We identified six bedrock beliefs. We wanted to say them in a way anyone could understand them. This morning we want to affirm the first of these, that *God loves us no matter what*. Or as Paul says it in Romans 8, *there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord*.

Now I can see how we might look at Paul's words as a general pious thought covering all people. It is true that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. However, Paul is not talking about everyone in general.

Here Paul is talking about the kind of assurance that is simply not available to anyone who does not know and love God through Jesus Christ.

Verses 28-30

In verses 28-30, Paul's thinking goes like this. If you love God, it is because God has called you according to his purpose. If he has called you, he has predestined you to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. If he has called you, it means he has justified you (declared you acceptable). And those whom he justifies, he glorifies.

Now, that is a lot of "religious-speak." So think of it this way. You get close to graduating from college. You start putting out your resume. Then one day you get a call or a letter informing you that someone wants to talk to you about a job. How exciting! Somebody has noticed you. You go to an interview or two or three. You, of course, have to ask yourself if you like the boss of this company enough to work for it, but the fact that you were noticed exerts great influence on you. Somebody up there must like you.

Then it happens. That somebody offers you a job because you are justified, you are acceptable. And if you sign on, the most amazing thing happens. You get rewarded. They pay you to work for the company. What glory there is in being hired! You begin to feel that you are somebody special, and you are, of course. You might even start to feel that you were "predestined" for this job, this is really what you are all about.

Well, Paul says if you have signed on with God's company, it is because God noticed you, God deemed you acceptable (justified you) and recruited you. God wanted you to be part of His team. And the most amazing thing, God glorifies with the reward of his eternal love. Unlike a boss who might decide to fire you tomorrow, God's love for you is forever. He never takes His eye off you, to the extent that God makes everything work together for good through you according to his purpose. (verse 28)

The truth is God tries to recruit every one of us. If we turn him down, we will never know nor experience the deep anchor of his love. It is only by joining his team that we will ever get it or understand it.

Verses 31-36

Now, here is the counter-cultural reality of what Paul is telling us.

If God is for us, if we believe that, then nothing that happens to us can ever drive a wedge between us and God. God never stops loving us, and we never give up on God.

Look at verses 31-36. "If God is for us, who is against us?" Well, there might be a lot of people against us. But the answer is that since God is for us

there is no one against us who has the power to separate us from the love of God. Who will bring a charge? Who will condemn us? Certainly not God. After all, he gave his only Son who died and was raised again and sits at God's right hand and intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness, or peril or sword or high gas prices be able to separate us? No, no, no!

Isn't this the answer to those who believe their suffering is a punishment from God? If we have been called according to his purpose, he loves us. End of story.

However, notice what he does not say: that since God is for us, nothing bad will ever happen to us. It always amuses me when someone says they can't believe in God because so many bad things happen. Hey, have you ever noticed? Bad things happen even when you don't believe in God. It hardly solves anything to say there is no God.

Verses 37-39

In fact, those who believe in God have an advantage. With the assurance of the love of God, that God is for us, no matter what, we can be "more than conquerors" through him who loved us.

This phrase in verse 37, "more than conquerors," is what saves this passage of scripture for me. It could be just a drivel of pious words, like "Hang in there, take it on the chin but don't worry, because God loves you." But that is about as far from what Paul is saying as one could imagine.

Here Paul turns the corner. Suffering does not drive us away from God. It is through suffering that redemption comes. Instead of folding up under the stress and agony of suffering, we take heart in the assurance that God is for us. We rise up in the midst of suffering to take on the powers that cause the suffering. We are not afraid to confront any and all powers that seek to take over our lives, that seek to trample us down, that seek to own us. If God is for us, we do not politely yield to the fate of our suffering. We do not go quietly into the night. We rise up. We become more than conquerors of our own fears. We become conquerors of the powers that would destroy us.

Look, God did not send Jesus to turn us into band-aid Christians or satisfied customers of the status quo. Jesus came to turn us into warriors against everything that plagues our lives from the inside out. What is it that is plaguing us? Is it materialism? Is it worry? Is it uncontrollable lust? Is it guilt? Is it anger? Is it hatred? Is it fear? Is it injustice? What is it that defines who you are?

Whatever it is, don't let it get to you. Instead, rise up against it under the banner of God's love.

At Men's Bible study on Tuesday, it occurred to me for the first time in my life that this passage is missional. Our bedrock belief is missional. Paul's words are like fuel for our missional engines. We have a group in our church giving their time to help us zero in on a Signature Ministry. This ministry will help us target those we believe we can reach with the liberating good news of God's love. God put us here to make a difference and we are talking about making a difference in our community. The only way we are going to be effective is by remembering that God is for us. God is for us human beings and has called us according to his purpose to get us out of our seats and into the world where people need to know that God is for us. Because if they know that, if they believe that, there is nothing, no power on earth or in heaven, that we cannot conquer. If God is for us, then I have to treat every person as someone God is for. If God is for us, then I have a lot of fishing to do.

You see, this is our mission. This is the mission of those who are on God's team. It is to tell others about an anchor that holds us where the fish are biting even through the worst storms of our lives. The love of the God of the universe keeps us from drifting. Protects us from the dangers that can sink our boats. Gives us the courage to go forth because God loves us no matter what.

Look, I never want to hear the words of my neighbor again, especially from God, "Why didn't you tie my anchor line to your boat? I can't believe you lost my anchor. Without my anchor, you weren't able to fish." No, I invite you today to tie your life to the unshakeable anchor of God's love. You can do that by giving your life to Jesus Christ, by joining God's company and going to work for him. Once you take up the life of Jesus as your own, you too will be able to say that nothing in all creation can separate you from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.