



Romans 8:26-39
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
July 26, 2026
The Rev. Wesley Steven Rowell

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

There are some passages of scripture that carry us. That carry me. I've been living with these words from the apostle Paul my entire life, and I still find myself astonished by them. Not because they're sentimental or easy. But because they are so audacious. Listen again to what Paul dares to say: *"There is no condemnation..." "Who will bring any charge against God's elect?" "Who is to condemn?" "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"* Who talks like that? Who can say such things in a world like ours?

Lately I've been noticing something I have done most of my life. I can meet someone, or see someone, or read about someone online, and within seconds I've already decided who and what they are. And I am lethally good at it. We all do it. We categorize. We rank. We judge. We decide who's safe, who's dangerous, who's right, who's wrong, who's a winner, who's a loser. We build little courtrooms in our minds, courtrooms where we are prosecutor, judge and jury. And after a while, we begin to imagine that God lives in that courtroom too. Keeping score. Building a case. Waiting to render a verdict. But Paul says something radical. *"There is now no condemnation."* Not less condemnation. Not postponed condemnation. No condemnation. Then he asks a series of questions that sound almost like a lawyer who has suddenly realized that the courtroom has disappeared. Who brings a charge? Who condemns? Who separates? It's as though Paul is dismantling the whole system we thought we were living in. The charges have been dismissed. Condemnation is no longer the story. The courtroom is empty not because justice disappeared, but because Christ has already stood where we stand. Condemnation is not God's project. It never is. Transformation is God's project.

And this raises another question: If God is not standing over us as judge, waiting to condemn us, then what is God doing? Paul's answer is that God is forming us. Shaping us. Conforming us to the image of Christ. In one of the verses we often hurry past, Paul says that God's purpose is that we should be *"conformed to the image of his Son."* God's purpose is not simply to forgive us. God's purpose is to make us like Christ. And if this is true, the implications are staggering. The goal of salvation is not merely escaping punishment. It is becoming like Christ.

That is an extraordinary claim. God isn't simply determining whether we've passed the test. God is patiently, lovingly, persistently making us more like Jesus. Not someday. Now. Changing not only what we do. Changing how we see. Because often we don't see as Christ sees. We quickly reduce people to categories. We make assumptions. We forget that every person we meet bears the image of God. And not just the people we love but very specifically and very pointedly the people we do not love. We live in a culture that rewards us for sorting people into camps-political, ideological, racial, economic. Christ keeps insisting that we see a person before we see a category. This is not a self-improvement project. This is the deep work of the Holy Spirit, continually shaping us into Christ's likeness.

Perhaps being conformed to Christ means that, little by little, we begin to see the world through Christ's eyes. And this is the great freedom God offers us. Freedom from judging and

scorekeeping. Freedom to love. Freedom to see Christ. And maybe I encountered that freedom long before I understood it or ever knew how to preach it.

In the early 1990s I lived in Chicago during the height of the AIDS epidemic. Some of you remember those years. And some of you have your own memories. I remember walking the streets and seeing men my own age, or only a little older, so ravaged by disease that they looked ancient. I remember wheelchairs. I remember faces that disappeared from one week to the next. I remember opening the free weekly gay newspaper and finding pages and pages of obituaries. Names. Photographs. Lives. Every single week. I knew hundreds of people who died. And at that point in my life, I have to confess that I wasn't even sure I believed in God anymore. I couldn't make sense of a God who would allow such suffering. But there was someone I loved dearly who was dying during those years. His name was Michael. And these words from Romans became precious to him. *"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"* And Michael somehow believed those words despite all the seeming evidence to the contrary. Those words stayed with me. Long after I had forgotten other things. Long after I had forgotten all the arguments about God. Those words stayed. I don't think they stayed because they explained AIDS. They didn't. They didn't answer "Why?" They didn't remove the grief. They simply refused to let death have the final word.

Over the years these words have taken on an even deeper meaning for me. When I heard them in Chicago 30 years ago, I heard them as comfort. Now I also hear them as vocation. Because if nothing can separate us from the love of God...then we are finally free. Free to become the people God is calling us to be. Free to be conformed to Christ. Free to see with Christ's eyes. Free to love with Christ's heart. After all these years, after Chicago, after walking with people through grief, after carrying these words for decades, I hear Paul differently.

The apostle Paul wasn't writing this letter from a safe distance. He knew tribulation. He knew persecution and imprisonment and suffering. This isn't naïve optimism. This is testimony. Paul wrote, "I am convinced." Not, "I hope." Not, "I wish." "I am convinced." And I find myself saying along with Paul, "I am convinced." Not because suffering has disappeared. Not because every question has been answered. But because I have seen, again and again and again, that God's love does not let go of us. And this is why I am convinced. And this same love, this same amazing grace, is quietly, patiently, relentlessly shaping us into the likeness of Christ.

As I prayed with this passage this week, I kept hearing the hymn that has lived in me my whole life: *"Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see."*

I will leave you with this. We are so often bound by our judgments, so blinded by our fears and anxieties, that we don't see Jesus right in front of us. But Christ is in that very person you can't see any good in. And beloveds, once you begin to see Christ in another human being, you cannot unsee him. Once you see Christ in the immigrant and the trans person and the prisoner, you cannot unsee him. Once you begin to see Christ in yourself, you cannot unsee him. Once you see that nothing—not life, not death, grief, fear, nor anything else in all creation—can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus, you cannot unsee it.

So go into the world this week. Look for Christ in the stranger. Look for Christ in the one you were taught to hate. Look for Christ in yourself. Let the world see Christ in you. Look for Christ. Because once you have seen Christ, you cannot unsee him.