



David McWilliams: Jesus loves me, this I know for the Bible tells me so. It's all going to be okay because God loves you. God works all things for our good. Nothing bad can happen when God is watching over us. It all happens for a reason. God is in control and love is worth the struggle. Love means never having to say "I'm sorry" because love is blind. Oh, and love comes naturally. One day it will make sense because God has a plan. You don't need to worry, God is just calling you to something greater and if God is for us, who can be against us. With God, anything can happen at any time. You just got to believe hard enough and you can be an overcomer because God never gives up on you. Most importantly, no matter what you do no matter how bad you are, nothing can separate you from God's love.

Platitudes, truisms, cliches - they're all things that make us feel really good inside when somebody says them but have no real substance. There are things that people tell us when we're suffering because they think it's going to make us feel better but in reality it just makes us feel helpless and makes God seem inadequate. Why is it then that our reading for today from Roman 8 sounds so much like those cliches?

"Neither life nor death, nor height nor depth, nor anything in all of creation can separate us from the love of God - for God works all things to the good of those who love him who have been called according to his purpose," Paul writes. It sounds like some far off theology, some great concept but something that's not real, something we tell other people but don't actually believe applies to ourselves. It sounds like something that you would hear on Sunday but that makes no sense on Monday.

But nonetheless cliches are how we inevitably talk about abstract concepts such as love.

I had a professor in college who told me that there are two sermons that no one can screw up, the first one is Easter. If you can't preach the resurrection then you just can't preach. The second one is a sermon on love because everybody loves hearing what they already know and we've told since we were little kids that God loves us. Therefore any sermon on God's love, people are going to like.

Therefore, when I got the text to preach this weekend and I read "Neither life nor death nor anything in all of creation can separate you from God's love." I should have been set. It should have been the easiest sermon I ever wrote. But the problem is that I took this internship as an



opportunity for pastoral care. I spent my summer surrounded by suffering, by people for whom that just did not seem true, who would have had a hard time saying that everything works out for the good of those who love him.

People like the woman that I met during one of my hospital visits when I volunteered as a chaplain at Mount Vernon who told me write when I walked in the door, "I am so tired of suffering." She continued to tell me that a few years ago her mom had died. When her mom died, her brother started abusing her. In order to escape the abuse, she moved away from her family and when she got here, she lost her job. When she lost her job, she lost her money. When she finally got a glimmer of hope and the inheritance check came, it bounced and the funds weren't there. Then to make it all worse, she just found out that she had been diagnosed with a disease that would likely take her life. As I talked to her she told me "I am so tired of suffering."

I spent the summer with people in Guatemala on a mission trip, with youth who asked me questions about God and refused to accept a simple answer, who would have instantly rejected a cliché such as God is love. Those same people who felt so called to go down to serve in Guatemala ended up becoming very ill, very sick. While I promised I wouldn't give the dirty details from the pulpit, I can tell you from experience that it did not feel like all things worked to the good of those who love him, who have been called according to His purpose.

That leaves me with a dilemma, do I reject the words that I heard from Romans, these words of reassurance or do I reject my experiences that I've had this summer that have told me that suffering is real? Refusing to reject either one of them I realized that love must not be about life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness because if it is, then God's love must not be constant. If it is, then there is something that can separate me from God's love and it's very real. It's called suffering! But the love that Paul wrote about was the love that was revealed in the gospel, the love revealed in Jesus Christ. It was the love in which Jesus Christ gave himself up for us and selflessly and self-sacrificially died on our behalf.

Listen to the answers to the questions that Paul proposes. He says, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" It sounds a lot like the clichés that we read earlier but his answer doesn't. He writes, "He did not spare his own son but gave him up for all of us." Who then is the one who condemns? No one, for Christ who died is also interceding. What then



shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword, peril? No, Paul concluded. Nothing can separate us from the love of God because the love of God is not life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The love that Paul talks about is death. He gave himself up on our behalf. It's dependence. He who died is also interceding on your behalf. It's destruction. It's hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness.

He goes so far as to quote a lament song, Psalm 44 which says we are like sheep to be slaughtered. We have done nothing wrong and yet we are dying every day. That is the love of which Paul writes. Death, dependence and destruction. It's that love that was so overwhelming to Paul that he wrote "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God who are called according to his purpose."

For those whom he called, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. It was the love that said Christ is your big brother and he has died on your behalf, he has sacrificed himself, he has selflessly given himself for you and now he is calling you to be conformed to his image, to take his image of selflessness and self-sacrifice and to make that your own image.

The woman who I visited in the hospital looked at me and I told her some of this and she said, "So it must be my fault." I said, "I'm sorry." She said, "You said all things work together for those who love God. If I love God then things should work out for me so I must not be loving God enough." I said, "No, no. Listen to the second part. He is conforming you to the image of his son." It's not for some greater purpose or to teach her a lesson or because you deserve it. You're suffering is not to be explained, it is to be understood that God is present in your suffering because he himself has suffered on your behalf.

Paul says suffering is a reality. Whereas we talk about love as a cliché, suffering is a reality that we're all well acquainted with, but he says rather than being passive recipients of suffering that we should actively give ourselves for others, that we should selfishly sacrifice ourselves in such a way that we expose ourselves to suffering, whether it's by being with people who are in the midst of suffering or whether it's by giving of ourselves so deeply that we open the door for suffering. Knowing that when we do, bearing the image of Christ that we are exposed also to the



presence of God; that God's presence goes with us because God's presence is in the midst of suffering.

But even still, that brings me back to my original dilemma. It still sounds like a cliché. It's a very different cliché. It's not as happy but it's still just a nice way to think about suffering, to think that God goes with you and that no matter what happens in life there will be suffering but that we can expose ourselves to suffering. It sounds, well it sounds like a cliché. The problem is that love no matter how we talk about it will always sound like a cliché. Love only ceases to be a cliché when we stop talking about it and start doing it.

When we become like the story this nurse once told me about a little girl whose face was becoming so white. The doctor came in and told her that she would need a blood transfusion. She had a twin brother and so they asked the little boy if he would be willing to do it. His parents agreed and he thought about it and decided that it would be okay. He laid in the bed next to her and they started the process. A couple of hours later as the color returned to her face, the parents started to rejoice knowing that their daughter was going to be okay but in the bed next to her the little boy started crying. The doctor went over to console him and asked him what was wrong and he asked, "How long until I die?" because he thought that by giving his blood to this little girl that he was giving his own life but he was willing to do it because he loved her and he considered her more important than himself.

Love only ceases to be a cliché when someone like Mother Theresa goes to India because she sees suffering and remembers the example of her savior and says "If Christ suffered on my behalf, I will suffer on behalf of those." She goes to the people who aren't worthy so they are told, who are untouchable so they are told. She begins to tell them how worthy they are. She begins to put her hands on them and to show them that they are loved, to go into a place filled with suffering and to selflessly and self sacrificially to give her presence and therefore the presence of God to these people. It is then that love ceases to be a cliché.

It is when somebody no matter how small to somebody as well known as Mother Theresa begins to, in their own life, embrace the reality of love and to begin to self sacrificially and selflessly offer themselves to others even though it may expose them to hardship and danger and peril.



I titled my sermon “Is Love a Cliché?” I can’t answer that question. Only you can answer that question for yourself. If you live out this love that Christ has displayed and that he calls you to, then for you love will never be a cliché because love will be the reality of your life. But if you only talk about the kind of love that God has demonstrated, then for you love will always be a cliché.

While I cannot answer that question, what I can tell you is that despite suffering, despite the dangers of this world, God is present in the midst of suffering and that God’s love, while it may not give you life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, will always remain true and bring you into his presence no matter where you are. The question is not whether God loves you for God has answered that, but the question is, will love be a cliché for you? I offer it to you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen.