

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts  
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on July 26, 2020 (Proper 12A)**

People sometimes ask me, “What’s your favorite coffee?” Which makes sense since coffee’s kind of my thing. But I usually end up dancing around the question a bit, since it’s really impossible to choose a *favorite* coffee.

Today, for instance, I’m drinking coffee from a farm in Nicaragua that I visited while on sabbatical a couple years ago. And it’s, delicious. (by the way, that’s the first and probably last time I’ll ever sip coffee while *preaching* a sermon).

But the reality is, my answer to the question is that it depends. It depends on my mood and what I’m particularly craving that day. Yes, I love those rich flavorful Central American coffees, but sometimes there’s nothing quite like the sweet, naturally processed coffees from the mountains of Ethiopia.

Similarly, I sometimes get asked, “What’s your favorite Bible verse?” That’s just an occupational hazard. But as with my taste in coffee, this also depends — on my mood and what’s going on in my life. Context is key. And yet, while I can’t name a single *favorite* passage, there are a few that I return to again and again; snippets of Scripture that always resonate no matter the situation or what’s happening with me personally or professionally.

You likely have similar go-to verses. And these are important. Like old friends, you know they’ll always be there. Comforting you, challenging you, inspiring you. I mention this because two of my favorite lines are embedded in this passage from Romans 8. So much of this section focuses on the fact that God never abandons us and that God is present in any situation, no matter how dire or seemingly hopeless. And this is a message that we need to hear over and over again. I know I do.

And it starts with prayer. Sometimes we approach prayer as if we’re sending God a to-do list. ‘God, I know you’re forgetful, and you probably have a lot on your mind, so I’m giving you a few reminders about what you need to do today.’ We don’t frame it that way, of course, but if we’re honest, that’s often how we approach God. With our shopping list of prayers. And then we invariably feel guilty when we forget to mention someone or some situation that’s on our heart. So we quickly add an addendum. ‘Oh, rats. Sorry, God. I forgot to pray for Uncle Ralph and that upcoming procedure he’s having next week. Can we add that to the list?’

But here’s the thing. When we’re struggling with prayer or feel that we’re not doing it correctly — whatever that means — God’s got it under control. Paul writes that the “Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” I love that. Because it means that when we pray, we don’t have to name everything all at once. We don’t even have to say anything at all. We can simply sit in God’s presence in the full and certain hope that God already knows our prayers before we even ask.

You see, prayer transcends human language. And I find great freedom in this, because it takes all the pressure off of *us*. Relationship with God is not about finding the right words or the most poetic words. Relationship with God is often found in that comfortable silence that we glimpse in our own relationships.

When you're at home with a spouse or fishing with a friend, you don't need to keep up a constant stream of words.

Chatting's great. Words with prayers are great — we're Episcopalians after all. That's what we do. And we do it well, thanks to the treasure that is the *Book of Common Prayer*. But sometimes it's okay to simply be. Whether that's around the house or with a friend or in non-verbal conversation with God. Relationship with God invites that comfortable silence of intimacy, rather than the awkward silence between two people who don't really know one another very well. Relationship with God is less uncomfortable first date with someone we immediately realize we have nothing in common with, and more fruitful, long-term relationship with a best friend. Which is why that line about "sighs too deep for words" is one of my most cherished lines of the Bible.

The other part of Romans that's a favorite of mine is the second half of this passage, which is often read at funerals. It concludes with these words, "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."

*Nothing* can separate us from the love of God. That's astounding, really. Think of the worst thing that has ever happened to you. It may have been the loss of a loved one or an illness or a friend's betrayal. This world is full of pain and heartache and you can't fully live without experiencing the agony of human suffering. That's just part of the deal. But the true miracle of faith is that God was with you in that very moment. In the depths of despair or the grip of terror or the searing pain of trauma.

Now, maybe you didn't feel God's presence at the time. Or understand it. Or even see it. Maybe you thought in the magnitude of your pain or grief, that quite the opposite was true. That you were abandoned by God. But that's not how God operates. God clings rather than shuns. God embraces rather than turns away. God stands right alongside you in the most painful times, and God is with you right now in this very moment. Not because you're watching church on your iPad or you laptop. But because nothing can separate you from God, no matter what you do or where you go or what you experience. That's the power of love. And it is the bedrock of our faith.

Right after this service we're going to hold a Zoom Town Hall meeting to talk about our regathering efforts and answer any questions that are on people's minds. There is a tremendous amount of uncertainty swirling right now. About church and schools and life in general. And uncertainty is not an easy place in which to exist. It's destabilizing and frustrating and scary.

But whenever and however we regather as an in-person community, please remember these two things. That through those sighs too deep for words, God knows what's on your heart. The anxieties, the struggles, the concern for yourself and others. And that nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. You are right now, wherever you may be, sitting in the divine presence, loved by God and heard by God. And on some days, on most days really, this knowledge is the only thing that sees us through.