

A Few of My Favorite Things Reading: Romans 8:26-39; Mt. 13 Proper 12/A
By the Rev. Karen Faye Siegfried; Trinity Episcopal Church, Sutter Creek, CA 7/30/17

Today (being my last Sunday with you), I am going to speak about a few of my favorite things which includes today's reading from the Book of Romans. When St. Paul wrote this letter to the Christian Church in Rome, the early Christians were facing the many perils of life including persecution, scarcity, violence, and oppression, just to name a few. Paul writes a powerful statement of hope to those whose lives are being weighed down by many things, including death itself. And what is this powerful word of hope that he speaks of? "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."
{Romans 8}

This passage is often read at funerals because death appears to be the ultimate separator. But these verses also speak to matters of separation like saying good-bye as in the case when a favorite neighbor moves or when a pastor retires. At the heart of what it means to be human, is the reality of separation from those people we love, expectations never met, or the powers of the world that often cause us hardship, grief, and loss. Shall these things have the final say? Do they have the power to undo us? Paul says absolutely *no!* The list of threats that can cause pain is long, but suffering is not a sign of futility nor is it the final word. God's love is!

Our hope as baptized Christians rests in this incredible power of love. This is our ultimate security and identity as beloved children of God. Some philosophers might say: "I think, therefore I am." But we say: "I am loved, therefore, I AM." While it is easy to feel overwhelmed by separation & suffering, Paul's rallying cry gives us hope: "With God, we will overcome someday."

Speaking of favorite things, I have had three great loves in my life: Medicine, the Church, and Steph. Each of these loves were revealed to me by the Holy Spirit and have filled me with its fruit: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. What more could anyone want in life? Each of these loves guided my life decisions which is how I ultimately ended up here at Trinity Church. So let me explain further.

When I was in the 8th grade, my friend and I decided to take up the spiritual discipline of going to Mass every day. We woke up an hour earlier, participated in Holy Communion, and then trudged off to school. On the evening of Easter Day, my family and I watched a black and white film called "The Robe." I had seen it before and I wasn't feeling particularly pious. But by the end of the film, I was filled with this incredible inspiration which I attributed to God. This inspiration came not only as a feeling but an idea that would direct the next nine years of my life. And the idea was this: "Become a physician and work with the poor and those who have few resources and little access to medical care." How did I know that this idea came from God? Because I was immediately filled with the fruit of the Spirit and I was given the passion and the wisdom to move forward despite all obstacles.

In high school, I studied hard so I could get a scholarship to college. At the age of 15, I got a job as a nurse's aide and saved all my money. I went to nursing school first, believing that this would get me into medical school and be the best way to support myself in the interim. I then spent an additional 4 years getting a degree in chemistry to achieve my goal. And while I was doing all this additional college work, I was working as a nurse on the surgical ward of Boston Children's Hospital.

After four years on this pediatric ward, I became disappointed in the practice of medicine. It seemed to me that it was more about treatment than healing. But if I were perfectly honest, I think I felt limited by my ability to stay awake for 24 hours at a time, like the surgical residents who were required to work without much sleep. So I decided not to pursue this goal and stayed in the field of chemistry. But I have never lost my love for medicine and the healing arts and continue to share my knowledge and skills freely. It is one of the reasons I love the Health Ministries here at Trinity.

My second great love was revealed to me while I was working as a Hazardous Waste Specialist and being active as a lay healer in my local church. It was during the 1980's when the AIDs epidemic hit the city of San Francisco with a vengeance. So many young men were dying. My neighbors were dying, my friends were dying, and our parishioners were dying. I became active in visiting the dying in their homes. I supported the feeding programs and blood donations to those gay men whom society either scorned or was afraid of. Being part of a loving church community who reached out to those on the margins, I was once again filled with the Holy Spirit whose message this time was: "Become a priest and build up Christian Communities of Faith with a focus on healing and wholeness." And while I had just finished a master's program in environmental management (vowing never to go back to school), the fruit of the spirit filled me with such joy and power, that I soon left my job and went to seminary. The rest is history.

I love serving the Episcopal Church as priest, pastor, and teacher. I love its focus on community, its emphasis on pastoral theology, its intelligent ways of thinking, its democratic polity, and its commitment to strive for justice, peace, and the dignity of every human being. To me, the Episcopal Church is a pearl to be valued and I hope each and every one of you will share the treasures of our tradition. Whoever you are, wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!

My third love came to me later in life when I was 53 years old. I had met Steph in passing at DeAnza College where she worked as Dean of Biology, Health, and Environmental Sciences. We only spoke casually. One day however, she asked me to pray for her as she was undergoing medical tests. On a Benedictine pilgrimage to Italy, I lit a candle for her in a small church in Assisi called St. Stephano's. As I prayed, I felt a sense of the sacredness in this simple but holy church. A few nights later in a dream, it was revealed to me just how precious Steph was and that I needed to pay more attention to this relationship. The dream altered my perception of her and our relationship changed from a casual friendship to a deep love. When I recognized the depth of her character and our common interests, it was easy to say: "for better or for worse...until death do us part." And to put the icing on the cake, Steph is a life-long Episcopalian who has supported me in my ministry as a vital partner and leader. I am so blessed to share my life with her and I hope you feel the same way too.

These three great loves were all revealed to me by the Holy Spirit. Each of them was accompanied by period of intense spiritual discipline including but not limited to prayer, worship, study, and service. If you want to hear God's voice in your life, practice these disciplines. They can open your heart and mind to the actions of the Holy Spirit who longs to impart wisdom and to lead you into unity with Christ. How do we arrange our heart, mind, body, and soul to be receptive to God's grace and wisdom? While we can't control the movement of the Holy Spirit, we can comport our lives to receive its grace.

When we practice the spiritual disciplines, we will be led to a deeper knowledge, love, and relationship with God. These spiritual disciplines include but are not limited to: Meditation, Prayer, Fasting, Study, Simplicity, Solitude, Submission, Service, Confession, Worship, Guidance, Praise and Celebration. I think practicing gratitude and giving thanks is my favorite way to pray. It helps me recognize and be receptive to all of the blessings God and others have bestowed upon me.

I have three core values which I suppose are part of my favorite things because they help me prioritize life choices. These three core values are: freedom, friendship, and meaningful work. I have never taken a job or stayed in a position because of the money. My work must be meaningful to me. Because of this value, I have lived a fairly simple lifestyle, avoiding debt at all costs, so that I could make choices when it came to employment. Freedom is the value that has always rung loudest for me. Like Patrick Henry's rallying cry during the Revolutionary War, "Give me liberty or give me death," I too have supported democratic principles, civil and human rights, & the freedom to choose the good.

But my thirst and understanding of freedom has expanded over the years to include freedom from ANTs (automatic negative thoughts), freedom from prejudice and narrow ways of thinking, and the freedom to choose joy over worry and fear. I am still on that spiritual journey towards freedom

while I continue to work to dismantle those powers of the world that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. What are your core values and how do they inform your life decisions?

There are so many things I love that I could stand up here for hours. I love my dog and many of the creatures of this world. They make me laugh and delight in God's creation. I love the sunrise and the sunset which I can see most days from my favorite house which overlooks the foothills of Amador Country. I love the ocean and taking walks along the beach which I look forward to in Morro Bay. I love going out to eat and schmoozing with friends, family, and parishioners. And while donuts are one of my favorite foods, a Thanksgiving dinner with turkey and gravy is the best.

And last (but not least), one of the greatest loves that I will always remember, is my love for you and your love for me. You are some of the kindest people I have ever met. Love for one another is one of the greatest strengths of Trinity Church that will serve you well in the future. Thank you for calling me to be your rector. Thank you for loving me and supporting me and joining me in the many ministries that we offer here in this small corner of God's kingdom.

The kingdom of God is one of the most important and favorite concepts for me in the Christian tradition. It is why I take my baptismal vows so seriously. The kingdom of God which Matthew describes as "the Kingdom of Heaven" in today's gospel, is not some esoteric idea of the sweet bye and bye but is as close as a mustard tree or a loaf of bread. Every time someone is healed, fed, nurtured, or treated with compassion, the Kingdom of God has come near. So rejoice and be glad for yours in the kingdom of God.