



University Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)
Austin, Texas

University Christian Church – Austin

C. Kutz-Marks

Separate from the Love?

Pentecost 11, a, July 27

Romans 8:26-39

There were two headlines in the news this last week that make this morning's Scripture reading seem particularly timely. The first came two days ago when the world learned that Dr. Randy Pausch, the computer science professor at Carnegie Mellon who became internationally known last year for his inspiring [“last lecture”](#) entitled "Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams" that covered the steps necessary for people to take control of their lives and live up to the goals they set early on. On Friday Pausch passed away after losing his battle with pancreatic cancer at the age of 47. Over 10 million people watched his hour long lecture on the Internet. Millions more bought his best-selling book on the lecture's themes or saw him on Oprah. His call was to live life with a fearless exuberance that he then proceeded to demonstrate in his own difficult life circumstances.

The other headline also concerned another premature death. This was the news that Tony Snow, former press secretary for President Bush, had died as the result of the colon cancer that he was diagnosed with in 2005. Tony Snow was only 51 years old, a husband and father of three. Again, on the Internet, in excerpts from an interview that he held with the magazine *Christianity Today*, Tony Snow talks about his cancer, his life, and the sustaining power God. These pearls of wisdom are also making their way around the Internet and several of you

have forwarded them to me. Listen as Snow reflected on how we might best deal with the awful news of such a diagnosis:

“We need to get past the anxiety. The mere thought of dying can send adrenaline flooding through your system. A dizzy, unfocused panic seizes you. Your heart thumps; your head swims. You think of nothingness and swoon. You fear partings; you worry about the impact on family and friends. You fidget and get nowhere.ⁱⁱ

To regain footing, remember that we were born not into death, but into life—and that the journey continues after we have finished our days on this earth. We accept this on faith, but that faith is nourished by a conviction that stirs even within many nonbelieving hearts—an intuition that the gift of life, once given, cannot be taken away. Those who have been stricken [with a terminal diagnosis] enjoy the special privilege of being able to fight with their might, main, and faith to live—fully, richly, exuberantly [there’s that word again]—no matter how their days may be numbered....

Snow goes on to share....

“The moment you enter the Valley of the Shadow of Death, things change. You discover that Christianity is not something doughy, passive, pious, and soft. Faith may be the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. But it also draws you into a world shorn of fearful caution. The life of belief teems with thrills, boldness, danger, shocks, reversals, triumphs, and epiphanies. Think of Paul, traipsing though the known world and contemplating trips to what must have seemed the

antipodes (Spain), shaking the dust from his sandals, worrying not about the morrow, but only about the moment.”

And here Tony Snow brings us back to this morning’s Scripture, back to the apostle Paul readying for a journey to the fledgling Christian church in the imperial city of Rome by sending before himself what many of us consider the greatest theological treatise in all of the Bible, the letter to the Romans. And here this morning its very core, the very heart of that the inestimable Romans Chapter 8.

This is it my friends. There is no better place to turn when you need a reminder of what it is that we believe and why. Here we have the highly distilled thoughts of a man who had been captured by the faith in Jesus Christ, which had revolutionized his life and empowered him. Here is the passage where we come to understand most clearly in exactly how it is that the spirit of Jesus freed him to be the greatest missionary the Christian church has ever known.

Paul gave away the secret 10 verses early. This man had clearly discovered the explosive power of faith, when through the faith that Paul had been given in Christ, he quite simply **outgrew fear**. He reminds us:

Rom. 8:15 For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!"

16 it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God,

Paul himself had learned the joyful news that even though physical death is inevitable, that it isn’t death itself that is the problem. It is the FEAR of death that which freezes us in our tracks, causes to make silly or unfaithful choices. Once he

found himself on the other side of this wall, he could even taunt death, “O death, where is thy sting?” because it no longer had any hold on him.

This passage is so central to who we are as a Christian community, so vital to our faith, that those of you who have attended any funeral or memorial services here in the last 2 and a half years have heard this passage. I make sure that it is included every time, because nowhere in Scripture is our hope in Christ more clearly, succinctly put. In times of trouble and trial, in times when physical death has come or is very near, we are reminded right here that there is

NOTHING we can do,

NO MISTAKE we can make,

NOTHING that can happen,

NO TRAGEDY can befall us,

NO DISEASE can overtake us,

THERE IS NOTHING that can break us away from the loving arms of God that are surrounding us...every moment... every single moment.

Tony Campolo tells the story of some years ago when there was this pastor, let's call him Philip, “of a church in Brooklyn, a run down, beat up area of the city. Philip got a telephone call one day from the local funeral director who said that he had a funeral that nobody wanted to take. None of the ministers in the area wanted anything to do with this funeral....ⁱⁱⁱ” because this was early on in the AIDS epidemic and this man had died of AIDS. Philip perhaps reluctantly, hesitantly said that he would help out.

Later Philip told a friend the story of what happened at funeral, “When I got there, there were about 30 homosexual men. They never looked up at me. Their heads were down and they stared at the floor the whole time I spoke. After the funeral service was over we got into the waiting automobiles and went out to the cemetery. I stood on one side of the grave with the undertaker and the... men stood on the other side. They were frozen in place like statues. They seemed to be motionless. Not a nerve or sinew moved as I read Scripture and prayed. We lowered the body into the grave and I pronounced the benediction. I turned to leave and then I realized that none of them were moving. I turned back and I asked, ‘Is there anything more I can do?’”

One of the men said, “Yes. They always read the 23rd Psalm at these things and you didn't do that. Would you read the 23rd Psalm?”

He said, “Certainly.” And Philip read the psalm.

Then another man spoke up and said, “There is a passage in the 3rd chapter of John which says that the spirit of God goeth where it leadeth and you cannot tell on whom the spirit of God falls. Could you read that passage?” So Philip read it.

And then one of the men said, “Would you read to me and to all of us that passage that talks about the love of God, that nothing can separate us from the love of God?”

Philip recounted to his friend that what followed was one of the highlights of

his ministry, when he opened his Bible to Romans chapter 8 and shared the Good News with 30 homosexual men, men who had been so ostracized and hurt by the church, reminding them of God's promise that nothing could separate them from the love of God.

Romans 8: 33ff:: Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed 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?No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 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.”

Amen.

ⁱThe “Last Lecture” can be seen at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ji5_MqicxSo

ⁱⁱ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/july/25.30.html> entitled “**Cancer's Unexpected Blessings**”

ⁱⁱⁱTony Campolo in a **30 Good Minutes** radio program broadcast on Oct. 1, 2006 entitled, “Wild Hope”