# I’M STILL CONVINCED: A SERMON FOR JULY 26, 2020

[JULY 26, 2020](https://churchofstmartin.org/2020/07/26/im-still-convinced-a-sermon-for-july-26-2020/) [PAMELA DOLAN](https://churchofstmartin.org/author/pamela/)

By the Rev. Casey Dunsworth

*Grace and peace from God our Creator, hope in our Redeemer Jesus the Christ, and the promised gifts of the Holy Spirit are with you always.*

What a delight to be with you this morning without having to leave my house. Certainly it would be wonderful to be gathered in person, but there is something to be said for this commute.

If you haven’t seen my face before, or at least not recently, I’m Pastor Casey Kloehn Dunsworth, and I serve at The Belfry, your Lutheran Episcopal campus ministry to UC Davis and home of LEVN, the Lutheran Episcopal Volunteer Network. Our LEVNeers have finished their year of service, as those of you who know and love Annie are probably aware, and we’re getting ready to welcome a new cohort in just a few weeks!

Our students are hanging in there, as well, figuring out what to do about this fall. Some will come back to Davis, some will stay home with their families to complete another remote quarter without paying rent here in town. It’s a very in-between time, it seems. Many things are in transition, so much is in flux.

These days are such a combination of everything and nothing. And as I thought about you all, tuning in from living rooms and on headphones, separate from one another in the same way our students have been, I remembered the scripture I keep quoting to them, Romans 8:38-39.

38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 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.

These verses seem to be following me around. I have encountered them at various times, in the lectionary and not, and they have always brought me comfort. In fact, I was invited to give a short devotion to a virtual gathering at California Lutheran University earlier this week, and I chose these verses without knowing they were part of this Sunday’s lectionary. When Pamela invited me to preach this morning, I went to scope out the scripture, and there they were. The Holy Spirit sure is wily sometimes.

Verses 38 and 39 are a small slice of a long letter, but they are, perhaps, the best part. So let’s take a step back. This letter to the Romans, written by the Apostle Paul—one of the undisputed letters, even—is one of the densest books of the New Testament.

That’s part of why I can grab just this one sentence and have so much to say! This book is full of “church words” like justification, salvation, obedience, apostleship, righteousness…Paul did not have the spiritual gift of concision.

Reading this letter can be stressful, because it seems impossible for us to maintain the level of perfection that Paul is describing. There are paragraphs on paragraphs about whether we’re following the law or not, whether we’re practicing what we preach, whether we’re wicked or righteous.

I am grateful, in times like these, to be a Lutheran. Episcopalians are great, also, for we share in this understanding, to some degree: while our conduct is crucial—no cheap grace around here—we are not wicked OR righteous, but always both/and. We are simultaneously saints AND sinners. So as we read this letter, with its condemnations and proscriptions, we can also read its assurances and blessings. Thanks be to God!

I know I am focusing on verses 38 and 39 this morning, but it gets even better if we start a few verses sooner. In verse 35, it is written: “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?”

This question is important, because the people Paul is writing to are experiencing these things. These are real concerns, not hypothetical wonderings about future potentialities.

These communities in Rome were Jewish and Gentile Christians, and a few years before the writing of this letter, Jews and some Jewish Christians had been expelled from Rome.

The recipients of this letter would be nodding along, remembering their own friends and family members who had been or were currently experiencing hardship, distress, and persecution.

They were, perhaps, being separated from their families. They were, perhaps, being imprisoned. They were, perhaps, being tortured. They were, certainly, afraid. They knew that these things could separate them from their loved ones, from their livelihoods, from the safety of their communities. And Paul senses that they have likely begun to wonder if these things are also separating them from God.

Is God still with them? Is God still with them, as they are separated from one another? Is God still with them, as they suffer? Is their suffering proof that God is absent?

Other times that I have read these verses, I have had to sort of reach for the “peril” that he is describing. I have had to imagine what it would be like to feel so separated from my community that I thought I was, perhaps, separated from God.

I don’t know if everyone tuning in this morning is a local, so you may have different situations where you live, but my husband and I have been at home in Woodland since March 16.

Most days, my Google Calendar is the only reason I have any clue what day it is, and I am so shocked when a week has ended or a month has ended.

My cousin, who lives in England, had to postpone her wedding, and our extended family had to cancel our trips to join the celebration.

I have an eight-month-old niece who has now spent more of her life in quarantine than out.

My husband is an English teacher at a local middle school, and will not re-enter his classroom for who knows how long.

These are trying times. I hope that you have been able to connect virtually with your family and friends, ensuring that physical distance has not meant emotional distance and spiritual distance. But you may have good days and bad days.

In addition to our shared isolation in this time of pandemic, the usual separations and marginalizations of our society have not disappeared. In fact, they’ve been thrown into stark relief.

We are in peril. The COVID-19 pandemic has killed 600,000 people worldwide.

Black and brown Americans are being unjustly murdered in the streets and in their homes. Refugees and migrants are in cages at the US border.

Billionaires exist while the minimum wage is unlivable.

Most Americans, especially people with disabilities and chronic illnesses, are still unable to access the healthcare they need to survive.

Legal protections for queer and trans people are so precarious.

The climate crisis continues apace.

I do not know each and every one of you, so I do not know what of this peril you may be experiencing yourself. These instances of hardship and distress, sometimes intersecting and compounding, may be just the tip of the iceberg of our suffering. We may suffer at the hands of others, and we may suffer internally.

Are you anxious about your health and that of your loved ones?

Are you angry about the people you know who are not taking precautions seriously?

Are you unemployed or underemployed?

Are you going through a breakup, divorce, or other tumultuous relationship?

Are you stressed about deadlines at work or school?

Are you regretting how you handled a conversation, with words you can’t take back?

Are you struggling to care for your children, or struggling to be pregnant?

Are you exhausted by the uphill battle for justice in this country?

Are you unsure about what’s next?

Dear friends in Christ, I have good news for you: God is with you.

This is one of the very few things I know to be capital-t-True. God is with you. The God who created you, fearfully and wonderfully, perfectly and preciously, loves you deeply. God loves you as you are, here on the internet right now. God is with you. God is with you in your joy and in your sorrow and in everything in between. There is nowhere that you go that God does not. There is nothing that you have done, are doing, or will do in your life that will send God away from you. God is with you.

And so I am convinced, just as the Apostle Paul was “convinced, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth”—nor pandemic nor social distance—“nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39, ish).

Anything! (I can list more things, if you want.)

I said earlier that this was the best part of this letter. I have loved these verses for a very long time. I have recited these verses over the phone and in person to friends, family members, colleagues, students, and probably strangers.

I recited this list to a sibling who was convinced that their queerness separated them from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord;

I recited this list to a congregation who was convinced that my femaleness separated me from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord;

I recited this list to a student who was convinced that their uncertainty separated them from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord;

this list was recited to me by a dear colleague and friend when I was convinced that something could separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

You may feel that I am belaboring the point, now, but I am not sure that you are convinced. You may be looking at this list of things that do not separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, and you may think you’ve got the exception. These things, sure, but your thing? That’s the thing that separates you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It is my duty and my joy as a called and ordained minister of the Church of Christ to tell you that you are wrong. You might not be convinced today—or maybe you’re convinced today, but perhaps tomorrow you won’t be—and that’s okay.

The beauty of life in Christian community is that one of the ways that God is with us is in one another. When we are feeling light, we can help to bear someone else’s burden. And when we are not convinced, we can seek assurance in one another’s faith.

You may not be convinced of every word of this passage, but if you’re convinced of some of the words, and the person in the video square next to you is convinced of some of the other words, and the person in the video square next to them is convinced of some of the other words, we’re covered. We’re in this together, friends.

And so we’re going to close with a little audience participation. We’re going to say this together, out loud. It’s going to be a jumble because, Zoom, and you’re maybe watching on Facebook, but don’t worry about it. Pull out your bulletin or your Bible to the eighth chapter of Romans. I know you’re all muted but we’re just going to make it work. Liturgical leaders, if you want to unmute and make a joyful cacophony, let’s do it.

Everybody ready?

“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!