

“For I am persuaded....”

A sermon by

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Good morning. I am Denis O’Pray.

I love a church with a sense of humor. A new vicar parachutes in, unknown to almost the entire congregation, and at his very first service they open by singing, *Come, O Thou Traveler Unknown*. Well, I do feel like a traveler unknown, and I am grateful for being taken in. I understand that such hospitality is a hallmark of life at Nativity.

Only in cultures that practice arranged marriages can we imagine what it might be like to have your first date and your wedding both on the same day. But here we are on our first date, and it is also our wedding day. You can tell me how you feel about that surprise on your way out, but I want you to know that I am thrilled, and I know that when I lift back your wedding veil, I will be surprised by beauty. And that, I think, is about as far as I should go with this wedding day metaphor.

I am grateful to your Bishop’s Committee and to Bishop Jelinek for their radical trust in appointing me to be your Vicar. I am sorry more of you did not have something to say about that, and I am sorry I didn’t meet more of you before I said, “*Yes*.” It remains to be seen if the Holy Spirit guided that process or abandoned it. We hope for the best.

Those who perpetrated this arrangement have no idea what they have gotten us into, but here we are, in something together. My prayer is that at some point in the future when there is a celebration of all that Nativity has come to be, this moment in our lives will be on the trajectory which leads to that celebration. May the line to our future be seen to have passed through this time and these decisions. May it please Jesus that together we will do “something beautiful for God,” as Mother Theresa said of her work.

It is hard to know what to talk about on a first date: If I tell you too much about me, it will seem that this is about me, and it surely is not; it is about us. If I tell you too little, your imagination will fill in the gaps, perhaps not accurately. So, I thought what I might do this morning is preach the word of God as that word comes to us in today’s assigned readings, and then in the reception following the 1130 AM service, to which I hope you will find your way, I will share a bit about what brings me to this moment in ministry and let folks ask questions of me, and perhaps ask a few of my own.

We are offered today in the epistle the most ringing affirmation of faith that I know. Let me repeat part of it in the words I first learned.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Romans 8:35, 37-39

Top that! Tell me there is a church that offers more than that. You can't get more by joining the Cathedral congregation down town or by going to church down the road at Hosanna. I defy you to tell me that you have an ancient creed or a modern testimony more powerful than Paul's words. The Anglican Bishops gathered at the Lambeth Conference can't promise more; they may in fact at this very hour be delivering much less. And remember, Paul didn't get to that affirmation by going to church did he? So, how did he come to be persuaded?

And here is the beginning of a sermon: How do we get there, to the place where we are able to say with the deepest conviction from the very depths of our being: *For I am persuaded.....*

How do we become a congregation of people who live these words with such integrity that others who chance by us on a Sunday morning, or bump into us at the office, or at Family Table, or during a family reunion, or on a hospital call, or while shopping, come to believe that nothing can separate them either from the love of God in Christ Jesus? How do we become that congregation?

Paul didn't learn it at Hebrew school or in church. They say he learned it while being knocked off his horse during an appearance of the resurrected Jesus. Well, I'm a rider, and I certainly never had a revelation of that sort while falling off my horse – which I've done often enough -- but if I thought that would do it, I will have a herd of horses here in the parking lot next Sunday and I'll knock every last one of you off a horse. I could not want more for you than this remarkable confidence that nothing can separate you from God's love. What would you do to experience that confidence yourself and be able to instill it in someone else?

I don't want to be heard suggesting that the good folks of Nativity don't already know something about these things, but I do want to say at the outset of our ministry together, I can not want more for you and for the people whose lives you touch than to believe that nothing can separate you and them from the love of God. Not your ego, not your sins, not your neglect, not your diffidence, not your willfulness, not your laziness. Nothing can separate you from the love of God.

The great challenge to the church in our generation is whether or not the church still has the will and ways and means to help its members claim this confidence and then proclaim it to a hurting world. If the goal is to not be separated from the love of God, is it possible to get there in a year that has seen natural disaster wipe out hundreds of thousands of lives and God do nothing to stop it? Can you still believe that nothing will separate you from the love of God when a terrorist blows your family to bits and then the military of a supposedly helpful nation blows away the rest of your extended family and calls them collateral damage? Can you believe that nothing will separate you from the love of God when merely your skin color or your sexual orientation or your wacky beliefs will separate you from the culture in which you live, making you an outcast?

Indeed, it seems to me that there is much in our world and in our national culture that is working 24/7 precisely to separate us from God, from our faith, from our loved ones, from our values. Think about it. Consumerism doesn't just operate at the Mall to separate

you from your cash (or plastic). Consumerism has infiltrated the strategies of all churches that are trying to grow. They now have to sell themselves and shape their lives in Christ so as to attract more people. And people church shop and denomination hop with diminished loyalty to any creed or congregation.

The cult of celebrity is not just trying to separate your teen from his/her virginity, with all due respect to Brittany and Madonna and Ms. Cyrus. It is trying to make you think that your life is of worth less than a celebrity's life since no one will pay \$14 million dollars for pictures of your new babies. (Yes, that's what Brad and Angelina have received from People magazine.)

Terrorism isn't just trying to separate your body parts from one another in a violent explosion. Terror wants to separate your nation from its long commitment to human rights and domestic freedoms, which have been eroded more in the last five years than in the 70 years before, even including the McCarthy era.

This current wave of xenophobia washing our shores is not just trying to separate foreign nationals from the benefits and responsibilities of American citizenship. No, the anti-immigration sentiments are trying to separate us from that statue that stands in the New York/New Jersey harbor, the one that for more than a century has said, "...*give me your tired, your poor...*"

The centrifugal forces of our divisive age threaten to break apart our nation, our church, your family, and your faith. And this is not happening because the bishop of New Hampshire is gay. And the towers of the World Trade Center did not fall on 9/11 because this nation harbors gays and permits abortions. And our problems are not caused by stem cell research or because birth control is available to our sexually active teens or because AIDS is epidemic.

The crisis we face personally and as a nation and as planet earth occurs because too many of us who bear the name of that crucified criminal have become separated from the love that took him to the cross in the first place and then bore him to heaven.

The Church of the Nativity must knit together that which has been separated. Relying on the Holy Spirit to be our connective tissue, we will transform and restore a world broken. Jesus transforms us, one soul at a time, so that together we will transform the world one heart at a time. And we will do this by becoming the community of faithful who are "...persuaded that ...[nothing] shall be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord."

...and the people said, **AMEN.**