

16 August 2019
Funeral Sermon for William Douthwaite

St. Mark Lutheran Church
Ridley Park, PA

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“The Promise of Nothing”

Text: Isaiah 55:6-13; Romans 8:26-39; Philippians 1:18b-26; Matthew 28:1-10

I wrote this sermon when Dad was put on hospice for the first time; when we were told he only had ten days to live. That was three and a half years ago! God gave us the gift of these extra years, which were so precious. So, with a little editing . . .

Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

If you go with us to Mount Hope cemetery today, you will see those words etched into my father’s headstone. Those were his words. ***Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.***

And I think the older he grew, the more precious they grew, because it seemed like he was being separated from everything and everyone else. All of his immediate family has been gone for some time now. When you’re the youngest child, I guess that’s to be expected to some extent. But that has been the case for *quite* some time now - not just that they were all taken from him, but that they were so soon. Too soon.

Of course, the separation that hit him hardest was when his Nancy was separated from him. Being ten years older, he said, he always thought he would go first. A not unreasonable expectation, we would say. But that our Lord called her home first, and almost 15 years ago, is another indication of what Isaiah said: *that God’s ways are not our ways, and His thoughts not our thoughts.*

Then for the past almost six years, he was separated from his home - from the home he had lived in for almost 50 years, the church, here, that he was a member of for over 50 years, and from some of you that he had been friends with for 50 years. That grieved him too. He loved it here. He loved all of you. He didn’t want to be separated from you, but knew . . . but knew that it was needed. A bum hip, a tired body, and a failing memory were making it too hard to stay.

So Dad, I think, was a lot like the apostle John in this regard. John was the last one too. At the end of his life, he was separated from his home, in exile on the island of Patmos. In the book of Revelation, John sees visions of the martyrs who went before him - and I always think he saw his friends in that group in heaven wearing white robes. Peter, his brother James, Andrew, and the rest - they all went before him, too.

But then Dad was like the apostle Paul, too. For Paul's words from Philippians that we heard were his words: ***My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary . . .*** Dad didn't know why staying was necessary; he wanted, like Paul, to go home. He said it many times. All the separation was hard for him. Hearing another friend had gone before him - especially his good friend Jack Buss - was hard for him. He wanted to go *to that place Jesus had gone to prepare for him.*

So how very, very precious these words of Christ for him, and for us today. As he, and we, live in the midst of a world of separation: ***Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing. 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.*** Nothing. Not even a failing memory.

And the answer why is very simple: ***we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*** *More than conquerors* through Him who was separated from His Father for us; forsaken on the cross for us. *More than conquerors* through Him who loved us so much that He entered into our death with us, enduring the condemnation of our sin for us. *More than conquerors* through Him who then broke the seal of the grave for us and rose to life again. *More than conquerors* through Him who then baptized us into His death and resurrection, that we might rise too. With Him. And never be separated from Him. Baptism is that inseparable bond where Jesus binds Himself to us, so that nothing can separate us from Him. Nothing. Yes, His Word and promise combined with that little bit of ordinary water is . . . that . . . great.

And Dad knew it. Jesus had planted that faith in his heart and made it grow and flourish over the years, as Dad was fed by the Word he heard preached here by so many pastors over so many years from that third pew on the left - right in front of the pulpit. That was his pew. And as his faith was strengthened by the Word of Absolution he heard pronounced here so often, and as he was fed by the Body and Blood of the Lord at this altar. *Jesus was holding onto him.*

And that's why a few years ago, Dad wanted to make sure of his baptism. One day he started thinking about the fact that while he *thought* he had been baptized, and was pretty sure he had been, he didn't have a certificate, and all that had witnessed it were already gone. The church wasn't even there any more. But he wanted to be sure. It was really important to him. To have *the nothing of baptism - the nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus* - that was so important to him.

And so my sister started making phone calls and investigating and following up . . . and finally found a pastor who had the records from the old church that had once been there, and Dad made a copy of the page showing that he had been baptized on April 20, 1924. And just how important that was to him is shown by the fact that he kept that page in

special folder all its own, which he kept in his fireproof lock box with all his other really important papers.

Ironically, while we were looking at some of his old papers on Tuesday, we found his baptism certificate - it was on the display you saw when you came in. He had it all along. He just forgot. Toward the end, he forgot a lot of things. But Jesus never forgot him. Jesus never forgets his children.

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Which is why he could say so often, with Paul, and pray for the Lord to take him home, to that place prepared for him. It wasn't because he was so strong, so faithful, or so good - but because he had Jesus' promise. *Nothing can separate me from you, Bill. Nothing. Tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword . . . or dementia?* Nah. I beat it all. I am your Good Shepherd. You shall not want . . . and you shall dwell with me in my house forever.

So now Dad has been separated from us - but just for a little while. The Father ***who did not spare His own Son but gave him up for us all***, has now answered Dad's prayers and called our father home. As He ***graciously gave him all things*** here in this life, so now still graciously giving him all things - including rest and peace and no more pain, as we await the day of the resurrection of all flesh. Our grand reunion with Dad and Mom, Bill and Nancy - Uncle Bee - and *All the Saints* who from their labors rest (LSB #677).

So we will do as Paul said, and rejoice today. That's not the same as being happy. We're not happy to be here today! It's better than that. It's that because of Jesus, because of His death and resurrection for us, because of His promises, because of His forgiveness . . . we can rejoice even in the midst of sadness and separation. Because He conquered them. Because He is greater than them. Because *We Know that Our Redeemer Lives* (LSB #461).

And we'll also do what Paul says in another place (1 Thess 5:18), and give thanks. Thanks for Jesus and all that He has done for Dad and for us. But also thanks to God for giving us this man for so many years, as father, grandfather, and great-grandfather; as uncle and friend; as His blessing to us.

So thank you, Father, for this our earthly father, and friend. For giving us a father who loved us, especially when that love showed itself as a leather belt across my disobedient and rebellious butt. For giving us a father who took us to church faithfully, who had us baptized, and showed us the importance of faith and being in the Word. Who showed us by devotions every night after dinner, lighting a candle and reading the Scriptures.

Thank you, Father, for giving us a father who showed us what love is as he took care of Mom in her last days. For giving us a father who prayed - the image of that I will always

remember is of him sitting in his recliner in the morning, before work, before the sun came up, with his Bible on his lap, his eye closed, and his hands folded.

Thank you, Father, for giving us a father who was a sinner and showed us how important your forgiveness. For giving us a father who struggled, to help us learn from him and giving us a chance to care for him and love him and understand that when we are weak, you are strong (2 Cor 12:10). For giving us a father who wasn't afraid to cry, and who taught us the importance of family.

But thank you most of all, Father, that You put him in Your family. That You adopted William as Your son. That You baptized him, redeemed him, forgave him, and at 2:17 am Monday morning, took him home to be with You. And thank You for the confidence that we now have in Your Word, not only that he is with You, but that we will be too, one day. That the "nothing" that was so precious to him is also for us. That it is true: ***Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.***

Nothing.

For Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

To watch and listen to the video of the service my brother made on his cell phone, go to:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUtFLF669ak&feature=youtu.be>