

YOUR INDESTRUCTIBLE BONDS
I Thessalonians 3:1-9 and Romans 8:31-39

Many years ago when I was growing up in the Detroit area, the circus came to town. This particular circus contained a world famous act called the Great Wallendas. The Great Wallendas were a family of high wire artists who had become famous for their death defying human pyramid built while balancing on the high wire high above the ground. They performed with no net beneath them. (As I said, theirs was a death-defying act.) But on this particular night at the State Fair Grounds in Detroit, January 30, 1962, they did not defy death. The pyramid collapsed, killing two of the Wallendas and seriously injuring a couple more. The next night the crowd was stunned when the remaining Wallendas, who had escaped unharmed, scaled the ladder and performed once again. Most people assumed the Wallendas would no longer perform. But the remaining members of the act considered their work important and they carried on.

In a similar way, Will Durant, the well-known historian and philosopher, hoped that his wife, Ariel, would carry on his work after he was gone. In the dedication of his best-selling book, *The Story of Philosophy*, Durant used the image of the singer and the song as he dedicated the book to Ariel. He wrote:

TO MY WIFE

Grow strong, my comrade... that you may stand
Unshaken when I fall; that I may know
The shattered fragments of my song will come
At last to finer melody in you;
That I may tell my heart that you begin
Where passing I leave off, and fathom more.

It's a beautiful image, expressing the hope that somehow the song or songs of our lives will continue and grow more beautiful in those who follow.

I think we all hope that our lives here on earth will make a difference – not a great change, perhaps, but that somehow the world may be a bit better because we were here. We hope that maybe through our children the things we thought were important in our lives can come to full blossom and begin to grow through their lives. Or, if we do not have children, we hope that maybe we have touched the lives of friends or neighbors or co-workers leaving the world a little better, a little

more joyful than when we arrived.

This is the kind of concern the Apostle Paul was expressing in our reading from I Thessalonians this morning. Paul, who started the church in Thessalonica, had to leave to continue doing ministry elsewhere. So the Thessalonians were left on their own to grow and mature as a church. After being gone a while, Paul began to worry about the Thessalonians and wondered how they were doing. When he could stand it no longer, he sent Timothy to them to see how they were doing. Much to Paul's surprise and great pleasure, Timothy writes back and tells Paul that the church in Thessalonica is doing fine – that their faith is strong and that there is great love among them.

Now imagine, if you will, a situation that may be somewhat analogous. Ric Snyder is sitting in his living room in Champaign, Illinois, saying, "I wonder how those Presbyterians in Grand Haven are doing?" Likewise, imagine Dave Peterson in Houston or Laird Stuart in his new office at San Francisco Theological Seminary, wondering how things are going here. Now, I also want you to imagine a day several months from now and think of Rick Campbell, sitting in his home in Holland, wondering, "How are my friends in Grand Haven doing?"

And, being the somewhat strange person I am, I'll answer my **own** question and say, "Well, that's a silly question Rick, you know they're doing just fine!" And I will **know** that, because during these past 15 months I've come to know your faith and your love and caring.

In our time together, I have come to know you as a people of grace and have many wonderful memories to carry with me. I think of all the **joyful moments**:

I think, for example, of the joy of assisting Tom in many baptisms, and the special joy of experiencing a first in my ministry: baptizing a mother **and** infant daughter when I baptized Melisa and Maya Overway.

I think of the joy of sharing meals together with the many wonderful people in the new member classes I taught.

I think of the somewhat dubious joy of seeing Tom dancing in a lovely dress and blonde wig at last year's follies - and my own humiliation in offering you an odd assortment of animal sounds!

What a joy it has been to participate in staff meetings that were actually fun – and the same could be said for committee meetings.

I've loved watching the Joyful Noise children taking their walks, linked together along a rope or riding in their super duper walk mobiles (and hearing them

sing, “Must be Santa, must be Santa” for what seemed like three months leading up to Christmas.)

...Getting my own “Forest Gump” box of chocolates from the Deacons and my own set of hand painted “Campbell Camels” drinking glasses.

Getting goose bumps and tears from the sheer beauty of the music offered in worship each Sunday.

Feeling a deeply spiritual connection to you as I offered you the Bread of Communion and said, “This is the Body of Christ, broken for you.”

But I think, too, of **difficult moments**:

- of visits in hospitals through serious surgeries or illnesses
- The sadness and grief over the deaths and loss of dearly loved ones
- The difficult and hard times life has dealt some of you...

But I can also think of what seem to be miracles of God's healing grace in our midst... and the grace that is involved in the giving of a healing shawl...

In marathon running there is a term called “hitting the wall.” It’s an experience of extreme physical and mental fatigue that often occurs around the 20 mile mark of the 26.2 mile marathon course. Runners often find, however, that if they push through the wall, they get a “second wind” and experience an endorphin induced “runner’s high.” About 18 months ago I had “hit the wall” in ministry.

Then Tom called me and subsequently I had the opportunity to come and serve as your Interim Associate Pastor. And it’s not an overstatement to say that being here has given me a “second wind,” and I’ve also experienced a kind of runner’s high or new joy in ministry. I have had some of the most fun I’ve ever had in ministry and have felt a profound sense of God’s blessing through you.

I guess, in all of this, what I am trying to say is that one of the **indestructible bonds** that holds this family of faith together is your love for one another and your deep appreciation of each other, oftentimes in spite of your differences. This love is one of the indestructible bonds upon which the church is built.

Nowhere is this bond better symbolized than in the great symbol of the church, the cross, a symbol that is central in our worship during this Season of Lent. Although it is customary to look at the cross and to think of the passion of Christ, or to look at the empty cross and think of the risen Christ, its deeper

meaning is the message of love. There is a horizontal bar symbolizing the love of Jesus and his command that we love one another as he has loved us.

There is also a vertical bar, symbolic of our connection to God, the God we are to love with heart, soul, mind, and strength, and the love of God freely given to us, the children of God.

You have demonstrated well this horizontal dimension of the cross – the love that you share with one another. But what can be said about this vertical dimension of the cross?

I think Paul says it best in our reading from Romans 8: “Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” It’s a passage beautifully rendered in our NIV translation. But there’s another translation of this passage that I think is more powerful because of the context in which it was written. I’m thinking of the Phillips translation.

J.B. Phillips was a brilliant minister serving a parish in the Southside of London during WWII. And if you know anything about London in WWII, you know how terribly it suffered from the devastating raids of German bombers. What makes the Phillips translation so amazing is that he translated much of these scriptures during the long, frightening nights of the raids. Lights had to be turned off all over the city, so you can picture Phillips sitting in the dark with only the flickering light of a candle to aid his work. All about him is the din of ceaseless bombing, and the frightened cries of men, women, and children being housed in the basement of his church. See him as he scribbles, intensely focused, translating the Bible, and listen to him saying in the midst of all this fear and suffering: “No, in all these things we win an **overwhelming** victory through him who has proved his love for us.”

“I have become **absolutely convinced** that neither death nor life, neither messenger of heaven nor monarch of earth, neither what happens today nor what may happen tomorrow, neither a power from on high nor a power from below, nor anything else in God’s **whole** world has any power to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord!”

God’s love for you... an indestructible bond. Absolutely nothing can separate you from the love of God.

What does this say to you here at First Presbyterian? You are the Thessalonians; Timothy will send word in the months ahead that you stand firm in

your faith and love. **Love** that binds you together as a church family in an indestructible bond. And **faith** that binds you inseparably to the love of God.

You have everything you need to be a strong church for years to come. I know you, and I am also **absolutely convinced** that nothing in the whole world can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Thanks be to God.

Amen.