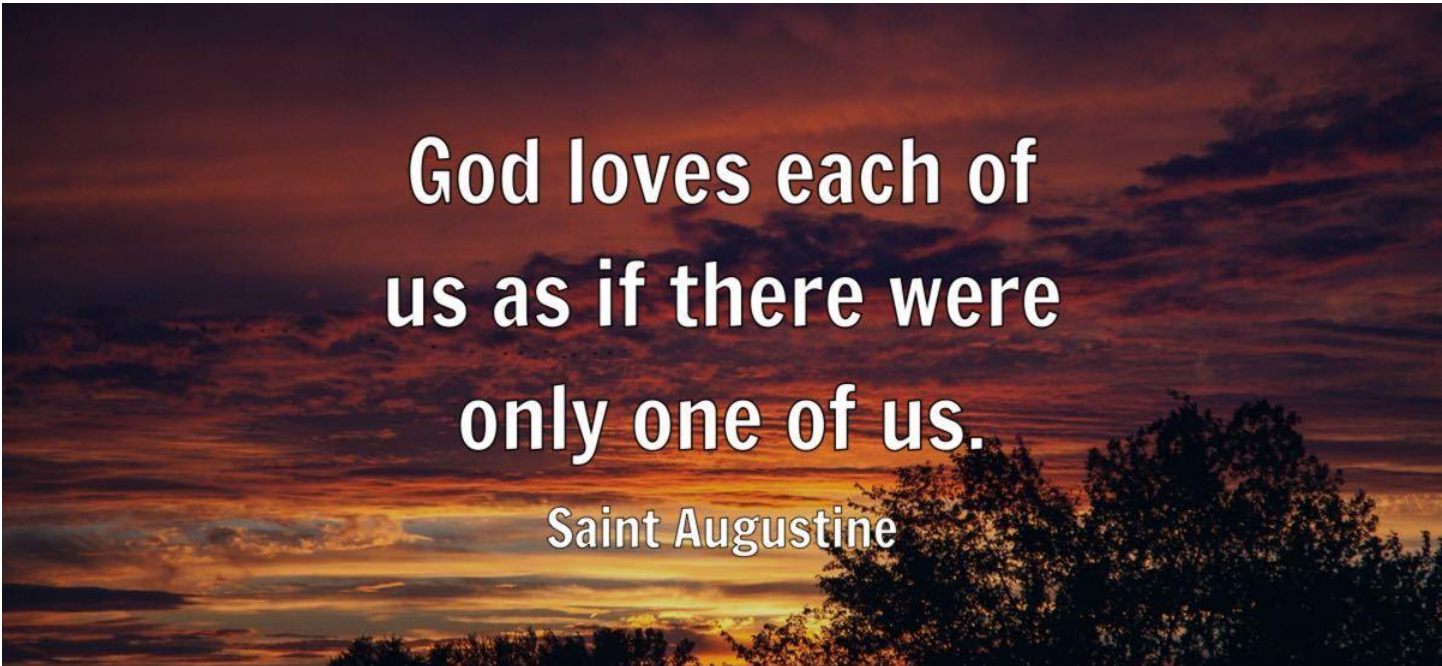




It's easy to preach one good sermon – much more difficult to follow it up with an even better one. Last week Paul, the Christian-chaser turned convert, compelled us to consider God's deliberate choice to love us.

Paul believed that God adopts us in order to give us a new people to call family and a new place to belong. In spite of human limitations, our human divisions along lines of differences, our human failings to provide for one another – considering all of that, God chooses us, adopts us, and loves us. As this teaches us unconditional love and acceptance, we can take that learning to return the same gift to the world. To practice unconditional love and acceptance to ensure that every thing and every one experiences it.



God loves each of  
us as if there were  
only one of us.

Saint Augustine

That love however doesn't mean that life is somehow easier – and so in almost anticipation of our arguments Paul says – but wait, there's more!

In today's reading, Paul says this work is not left solely up to us. The Spirit helps us, just as much as the redemptive work of God and the transformative work of Christ. When life doesn't go right, when we experience *trouble or calamity, persecution and hunger, nakedness, danger, or violence* – when our lives are not what we want them to be, or what they should be, the Spirit expresses our concerns and pleas with *groanings too deep for words, for if God is for us, who can be against us?*

It begs the question though, if God is for us, then why is life so difficult?

If God is for us, then why are there things like childhood cancer, hunger, changing climate and governments and millionaires and billionaires who profit when inflation and hardship run rampant? Traditionally – and this is far too heavy a topic for a summer sermon, but this is called *theodicy* – living in the tension of holding God's love up to the struggles of the world.

It makes us question, is God for us?



I remember when my eldest was born. The labour lasted over a weekend and we weren't sure if it was actually going to happen or not, so much so that I had a funeral that weekend that I led (and warned them ahead of time that I may not be able to finish.) Once we arrived at the hospital, all that waiting meant that everything happened quite quickly. From the joy of birth, to the worries of new life, we watched our little one be whisked away to the NICU, as closer monitoring was necessary as already the struggles of this life had set in. Faith doesn't promise

easy answers, because this life isn't easy. Two things can be true at the same time – that God wants the best for us, and still life can be hard. God can be for us even as we acknowledge the world isn't the way that God would have hoped. Knowing that, God promises through the words of Paul,

*<sup>38</sup> For I am certain that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, <sup>39</sup> neither heights nor depths--nor anything else in all creation--will be able to separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus, our Saviour.*

That confidence has contributed to making Paul's writings persist as long as they have. And it almost makes me believe it, not because of what I know of Paul, but what I understand of God.



God's persistence and patience is marked throughout our history, from Biblical stories up through the last few millennia. From the story of Israel with all its highs and lows, to the story of Jesus and a love that we could touch and hold and kill, to the growth and spread of the early church and all the good and bad done in the name of faith, God remained faithful. Confusingly so. Nothing separated us from God's love, no matter what we did, including up to this present moment with all its challenges. Each generation experienced their own unique fulfillment of verse 28,

*that God makes everything work together for the good of those who love God and have been called according to God's purpose.*

God makes everything work together for good, even when the world around us is anything but. Throughout our ever changing story of faith, God encouraged the generations to be 'woke,' to wake up to the hurt that surrounds us and enables us to work for the good that we can. It's heartbreaking to see how that's been somehow labelled a bad thing. Because this work is not God's alone. In each era before and after these words were written, we are called

to join God in the work of making the world good. Like a parent wanting the best for their child, God wants the best for us, the best for the world, for goodness to prevail, for love to be all we know. For God, *who knows everything in our hearts*, cannot be separated from the love held for us.



*One day, a little child is sitting and watching their father do the dishes at the kitchen sink. The child is quiet for a while before blurting out, "Why is your hair so white Dad? Was it always that way? Or was it all black?"*

*The dad thought about it for a moment then replied: "Well, every time that you do something wrong and make me cry or worried about you, one of my hairs turns white."*

*The little one thought about this for a while and then asked: "Daddy, is that why all of Nana's hairs are white?"*

No wonder God is traditionally portrayed with white hair. Choices that have led us down unintended paths, things done that have disappointed God, unchecked health concerns that have grown into overwhelming problems, worries that spread from person to person to community to world, weigh heavy on the heart that chooses to love us.

For there's plenty that separates us from God's love. I mean, I *want* to believe Paul's confidence that nothing will *be able to separate us*, but there is so much that **we do** or that **happens to us** that can separate us from the love of God. There are times that we run and hide from God, like Adam in the garden (Genesis 3:8-9) before God asks, '*where are you?*'

Those who struggle with addiction of any sort, soon discover it's easier to escape reality than face all its hardships. Whatever pleasure gained from the "drug" of choice enables the user to more easily forget their feelings of trouble or calamity. It starts as a temporary fix, but it soon spirals into addiction as one problem is exchanged for another.

Hiding away from the repercussions, some discover the courage and strength to accept the love and help that was always there. Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber has been honest about her struggles with addiction over the years. When she was in her twenties, she (for not the first time) *woke up in a basement apartment, not remembering how [she] got there, much less who [she] was sleeping next to...filled with fear...and [she] could not imagine giving up alcohol because alcohol was the only way I got through the life [she] was "living."*<sup>1</sup> She's talked openly about her hiding away from life and all of its worries, before facing it head on, with God's help.



While not a mandatory component of the healing of those who struggle in this way – it's no mistake that the first few steps in twelve step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous speak

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<sup>1</sup> <https://thecorners.substack.com/p/30-years-of-sobriety>

directly to refusing to hide from God – and acknowledging that we need help outside of ourselves. As Nadia reflects,

*I say this as an addict who has been clean and sober for over 31 years: I simply DO NOT have the willpower it takes to interrupt my addictive patterns ... I just have **the God it takes** to interrupt my addictive patterns. God and God alone. Our hope and our salvation, [who interrupts our harmful self-talk that is running on repeat in our brains]:*

*Today I won't eat compulsively or I'll not yell at my kids or I'll not spend money I don't have on [stuff] I don't need. Today, unlike yesterday I will finally stand up for myself. Today I will not place a bet. Today I will start meditating and lift weights and start that KETO diet. Today I'll go to The Container Store and organize my life so I'm finally in control. But we're not. We're not in control. Not really. That would be the point. We're addicted to poison and people, and praise and possessions and power.<sup>2</sup>*

We're addicted to thinking we can solve our own problems. Instead, we have **the God it takes** to see us through this life, *who knows everything in our hearts*, who cannot be separated from the love held for us.



Other times, parts of our life obscure God's presence like the clouds cover the sun. For those who experience deep depression or crippling anxiety, these become barriers to believing God's love for us. Too often like those with addiction, we jump to the blame game too quickly

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<sup>2</sup> [https://thecorners.substack.com/p/maybe-the-source-of-my-problems-cannot?utm\\_source=profile&utm\\_medium=reader2](https://thecorners.substack.com/p/maybe-the-source-of-my-problems-cannot?utm_source=profile&utm_medium=reader2)

before realising that not everyone chooses to hide away from the problems of the world. Sometimes we get lost. Sometimes the despair is too much, sometimes it's unexplainable triggers that overwhelm us, for some it's the ever changing chemistry within us that make us feel less than. We wonder how can we be wonderfully created by God (Psalm 139) if only to fight against the bodies and the minds that we're given? Feeling so lost, we can't find our way back without help.

And so hear these words again as God's promise to you,

*that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, <sup>39</sup> neither heights nor depths--nor anything else in all creation--will be able to separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus, our Saviour.*

We may feel separated from that love, but it doesn't mean it isn't there. In this imperfect world with all its problems, the white hairs of worry just mean that someone cares, as God's relentless love refuses to give up on us.

Of this, *I am certain.*