



March 20, 2024

A Note from Beth Palmer

Beloved Friends,

My husband Frank and I have lovely neighbors in our building, a brother and sister pair in their 60s, John and Patty. They both always have a smile for us and time for a friendly chat.

One time John and I were both walking in at the same time, and John was carrying another case of Natural Light beer. He apologized to me for that, said something about feeling bad that I always seemed to catch him carrying beer in from the car.

He knows I work in a church, and he seems to be under the impression that I look down on him, think less of him, because he drinks alcohol.

I don't think that. At all. In fact this couldn't be further from the truth.

Lots of us think that God judges us negatively, thinks less of us, looks down on us, when we do what we think are "bad" things. I think a lot of us worry that we're supposed to be working on "being better people," believing that's what God and the church want from us. I fall into this myself on the regular.

Lots of churches have taught that the Season of Lent should be about trying to give up our vices, so that (*implied*) God will love us more. If I'm a "better person" — if I drink less beer, swear less, clean my bathroom more often — then God will love me more, right? (We tend to miss one of the true messages of Lent, that "giving up" something for Lent is more about making more space to connect with God.)

Maybe it's just me, but the Season of Lent always feels like the Season of Flogging. Try harder! Pray more! Give up Diet Dr. Pepper! Feel shame for being human and not getting everything right all the time! (Pbth.)



April and Jon don't preach this; it's all me. And it really doesn't sound like the God I know.

I hope I told my neighbor right then that I don't care whether he drinks.

What I *do* care about is whether he knows how much he is loved.

Because *I* still struggle with whether *I'm* still loved when I do something "bad." Do you struggle with this? (No? Just me?)

I'm a good person a lot of the time. I recycle, chew with my mouth closed, pray, spend time with my parents, and vote.

But, confession: I swear.



I love a well-placed, emphatically-delivered expletive.

I grew up in church, though. I'm a "good girl." I shouldn't cuss.

Paul totally got this — Romans 7:15 — "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

A few weeks ago I decided to *finally* clean my downstairs bathroom, for the first time in I won't tell you how long. (I'd been ill and unmotivated.) I finally chipped away at the grime, got down on my hands and knees to scrub the floor and the base of the toilet, and I absolutely let loose several strings of curse words. I hate cleaning the bathroom! Kneeling on the floor hurts my knees! Why won't the magic fairies just come tidy and disinfect at night while I sleep?! I mean, *what* is their problem??

I used to give myself a lot of grief for my swearing, but I've since come to realize that allowing myself to swear is actually a growth move for me. I have spent a lifetime keeping rigid control over myself in an effort to appear "good." Yelling out some inappropriate language is actually pretty healthy for me. *As long as I choose my audience carefully* (very important, so I don't cause pain to another), it's a relatively harmless way to blow off steam and to relax my impossible standards for myself.

Does God love me any less because of my potty mouth? (Pun definitely intended.)

Absolutely not.



In fact I don't think it's *possible* for God to love us any less than *completely, recklessly*, with abandon. It's not in God's constitution. God *is* love (1 John 4). The very nature of God is *love*. "No matter what" means *no matter what*.

Does God wish I were a better person? **Is Jesus dying on the cross all about reconciling us with some angry God who's constantly disappointed in us, a God who's keeping track of our sins and impatiently waiting for us to grow up?**

Absolutely not.

"Love is patient, love is kind," remember? "Love keeps no record of wrongs" (1 Corinthians 13). Romans 8:1, "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

I believe that God actually thinks very highly of us. We are "the focus of God's delight" (Matthew 17:5, The Message). God sees us as *already* good (Genesis 1:31), *already* enough, *already* worthy, *just as we are*.

Thinking any less of ourselves just makes God weep.

See, it turns out that God *intentionally* placed a big chunk of the divine in us — God breathed God's very breath into us when creating us (Genesis 2:7). God isn't *just* "out there" but also within us. We are the home for God in the world (John 1:14, Colossians 3:12).

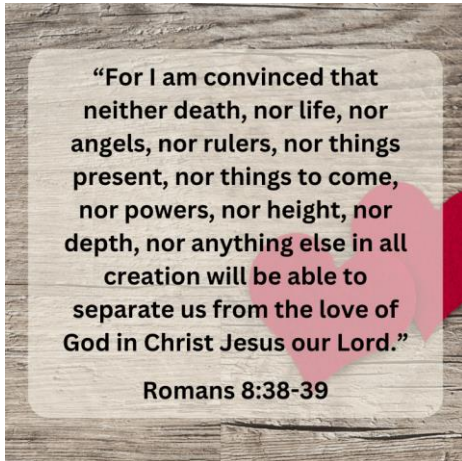
We are all a beautiful, *intentional* mix of human and divine, spirit and flesh...



...which means that even the parts of myself that I find harder to love — the me who doesn't clean her bathroom often enough, who lobs *emphatic* cuss words at other drivers (when they're not looking), who eats too many Thin Mints when she's upset (a serving size is a sleeve, right??)... this sometimes irritable, inappropriate, impolite, needy, selfish, judgy, *human* person, who sometimes very deeply believes that God can't possibly love *me*, love all. this. hot. mess. of a woman — **those parts of me are *also* part of God's intention.**

The journey of growth is about remembering that God created us as *both* beautiful *and* messy, flawed *and* gifted, strong *and* weak, human *and* divine. This is part of what it means to be saved, to move toward wholeness, to experience resurrection — **accepting and even embracing *all* of me, and trying to trust that *all* of me is completely, irrevocably, recklessly loved by God.**

It is this love that transforms us, saves us, resurrects us... Being loved like this helps us to accept and embrace all those less-polished parts in *others*, too... which grows empathy and grace and patience in us... which leads to being able, with God's help, to love our neighbors, love even our enemies, and help build the beloved community here on earth.



Paul writes this beautiful thing in **Romans 8**: "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."

This is the *no matter what* love we talk about around here.

And no matter what really means *no matter what*.

If you want to talk more about these ideas, about how God sees you, about what the cross is all about, I encourage you to come to the **Understanding Good Friday** class that Pastor April and I are leading this Sunday, March 24. We'd love to hear what you think about all this. We'll be in the social hall from 1:30-3pm (no need to sign up, just come ahead).

And April is preaching on Romans 8:31-39 this Sunday at all three services, too.

Grace & peace to you, beloveds...



Remember how much and how fully you are loved, just as you are.

Beth



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God Loves You  No Matter What

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