

Zero Degrees of Separation

July 26, 2020

Text Romans 8:26-39

It used to be that people lived by a belief that there was safety in numbers. From children who were taught to follow a ‘buddy system’ for safety’s sake at places like beaches and pools; to adults who were advised not to walk alone in risky parts of town; close proximity to people we could trust was a reliable strategy for personal safety. Times have changed, thanks to the COVID pandemic. Nowadays, “misery loves company” might be a cautionary slogan of the times and social distancing has become the watchword to avoid spreading the virus. And whenever we can’t put physical distance between each other, we rely on masks and gloves to be our shield against infection. Throughout all this, we’ve been learning what a challenge it is to maintain separation from one another.

There’s actually a thing called “Small World Theory” that proposes a model of how tightly knit our world really is. This model is known as “Six Degrees of Separation.” Six degrees of separation claims that anyone on the planet can be connected to any other person on the planet through a chain of no more than five intermediaries. According to “Six degrees of separation” I could theoretically have a message delivered by word of mouth to anyone on Earth by going through five or less people where each person in the chain knows the next person on a first name basis. For instance, if I had something I wanted to say to Vladimir Putin and I emailed it to my brother who lives in San Diego; and he texted a friend of his who works in Silicon Valley, who then included it in a message to business contact at a tech firm in Beijing, who then repeated it in a letter to his daughter who was studying at the University of Moscow, who spoke about it on a date with her boyfriend who works in the Kremlin who then brought it to the attention of Vladimir during a security briefing on outspoken American clergy... there you have it! From my lips to Putin’s ears in less than six degrees of separation. In such a tightly knit world, it’s little wonder that social distancing can be so challenging!

In his Letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul explains something like the opposite of “Six Degrees of Separation.” Unlike “Small World Theory,” which measures the degree of separation between one human and another by counting the number of go-betweens it takes to connect them, Paul’s concept gauges the degree of separation between Christians and God’s love. And, no matter how many ways you measure that, the answer always comes out the same. His conclusion can perhaps be best summed up as a theory of “Zero Degrees of Separation.

He begins by posing the question: “Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” Then he names some things like hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword. Some potentially serious degrees of separation in that list. But Paul dismisses them all with a bold claim. He says, “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.”

Paul leaves no stone unturned in his search for something that can divide us from God's love for us. And what does he discover? Zero degrees of separation. Paul did not reach this conclusion through purely intellectual speculation. In the eleventh chapter of 2nd Corinthians he enumerates the things he endured in the course of his ministry. He says he was: flogged five times, beaten with rods three times, and stoned once. Three times he was shipwrecked and once spent a night and a day adrift on the open sea. He had known hunger, thirst, and exposure. All of this hardship would have been avoidable if Paul had only distanced himself from the ministry Christ had called him to; and if he put distance between himself and the churches, he felt a responsibility towards.

The oddest aspect of Paul's argument for zero degrees of separation from God's love is that a repetitious pattern of misfortunes and disasters such as Paul experienced, would have generally led one to conclusion. Which is that Paul was light years away from being in the orbit of God's love. "Bad things happened to bad people" was the popular consensus towards folks who had been put through the ringer the way that Paul had. And if you didn't want to be on the outs with God yourself, then you'd best socially distance yourself from such people.

Funny though. It was the outcasts that Jesus was attracted to. Their hardships and distress couldn't separate them from his love. Their poverty and vulnerability couldn't either. While others might have been repelled by them, Jesus drew closer to them. And that, Paul says is the direction that the Church of Jesus should always follow. Even if we are subject to criticism and rejection for doing that.

It is God who justifies, he reminds us. Who is to condemn? If GOD is for us, who can be against us?! There is no circumstance in life where God's love fails us. Even if we end up socially distanced from the approval of others who disagree with us, nothing can separate us from the love of God that is ours in Jesus.

Nothing.

To the contrary, we are assured that in all things, even the difficult and trying time of life, God works all things together for good for those who love God and are called to God's purpose. And what is God's purpose for us? It is to be conformed to the image of his Son, who refused to socially distance himself from those who needed God's love most, in order to have the approval of those who demonstrated God's love the least.

Look around. Who is left out there on the margins? Who is being socially distanced, not out of compassion and caution, but out of exclusion? What are we willing to risk to step out of the crowd and stand with them?

Maybe there is safety to be had in numbers. But love can be found in stepping out of the safety crowds provide, in order to care for those on the outskirts. That can be a lonely, risky place.

But, in all these things we can be confident in our being more than conquerors because our security does not depend on anything or anyone other than God's love. A love that nothing and no one can ever separate us from.

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