
Stronger Than Death¹

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Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 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.¹

—Romans 8:35-39

Late last Tuesday night I arrived home from Valparaiso University after some of the best and worst days I’ve ever experienced. The infamous Class of ’71 had our annual retreat. Fun, food, lots of laughing, a few tears. New stories and precious stories retold many times filled our five glorious days together. We had celebrated, too, the 100th anniversary of the Lutheran Diaconal Association with a fun and friend-filled banquet and a stirring Eucharist. It was heavenly!

And then came the dreadful news late Monday that Gwen had died. It couldn’t be true. It simply could not be true. We had just seen her, talked with her, eaten with her, worshipped with her, hugged her goodbye. She could not possibly be dead. We honestly thought for a while that it was fake news. I remember saying more than once: “This is ridiculous.” When I called Jan Janzow, another member of the Class of ’71, with the news, she told me she could not breathe. We were shocked. Jolted. Punched in the stomach.

With absolutely no warning that death’s devastation was at the door, we—and I mean each of us here today—reeled. The

1. Preached at the Funeral of the Rev. Dr. Gwen Sayler for the Memorial Eucharist on November 16, 2019, in the Loehe Chapel of Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa. Deacon Karen Melang was in deaconess formation with Prof. Sayler in the Lutheran Diaconal Association class of 1971.

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ground moved under our feet when we heard that Gwen had died, and perhaps it is still moving, threatening moment by moment to take us down.

Life, ever the jester, was even more fickle than usual. Usually, life just moves along. Things to do. Places to go. Tasks to accomplish. People to love. People to serve. Stuff to deal with. And then out of nowhere it all comes to a screeching halt, or sometimes a quiet but completely unexpected end. No heartbeat. Instantly, it’s over.

Deaths like Gwen’s hit us all over the head with our own mortality. No matter how many pills and vitamins we take, no matter how much we exercise, and even if we eat right almost all the time, there are no guarantees. I might be next. So might you.

What did you do when you found out about Gwen’s death? I was blessed to be with people God has given me to know and to love for decades. I squeezed hands, hugged, cried on shoulders. I called others on the phone with absolutely nothing to say, just to hear them breathe. Thanks to those of you who were there for me! Thanks to each of you for being here for all of us! We need each other. God has given us to each other precisely for moments like this. Our care for each other is priceless.

But at times like this, when we must stare death in the face, we are not enough. St. Paul’s Roman congregation also stared down fierce enemies: hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword. The ground was moving beneath their feet. Their world was precarious and unpredictable. Losing their lives for Jesus’ sake was not beyond imagining at all. And yet Paul asserts that even when dangerous enemies attack us full on and we are not enough to beat them back ourselves, God stands by us, fights

for us, and makes us champions, conquerors through God's love.

Paul names the formidable powers that can reorder our lives, powers much stronger than we are, and, no surprise, death is the first thing on the list. Followed by all that oppresses us, all that debilitates us, all that burdens our present, all that hijacks our future. All that stole Gwen's hoped-for retirement. All that took her away from us who love her and needed her and who do not want to imagine our lives without her.

But here's the promise: none of these, none of these—death, life, angels, rulers, and the list goes on—can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. None of them are nearly strong enough to tear us, or Gwen, from God's everlasting embrace.

Love is as strong as death, as the Song of Solomon tells us; it is passion, fierce as the grave. But now comes God's Love incarnate, our Lord Jesus Christ, ruling victorious from the cross, rising gloriously from the tomb, the firstborn of all creation. Here we see the mystery: God's love is not as strong as death, but *so much stronger*. God's passion for all humankind is not as fierce as the grave, but *so much fiercer*.

Even though nothing can separate us from God's love, death has managed for a time to separate us from Gwen. What is it like on the other side, some of us, still growing in grace, may wonder? My dad used to say fervently and frequently after my mom died, "I wonder what she's doing now."

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I am happy to report that the Scriptures give us some hints. I am also happy to say that some of these broad hints have been incorporated into the Diaconal Litany that deaconesses and deacons in our community pray regularly. Gwen had these words on her lips hundreds, perhaps thousands of times.

Jesus Christ, my Savior,
by your glorious resurrection from the dead,
raise me to live with you forever.

Holy Spirit, Lord and Giver of life,
quicken in me the lively anticipation of my
resurrection from the dead.

God of grace, who nourishing us on the body and
blood of Christ, creates us into a new community,
make us to be indeed the body of Christ and a
vehicle of love and joy in this world, until we,
with your servant and our sister Gwen, offer the
full and perfect praise forever.

Amen.