

Sermon – Can't Take That Away from Me
Scripture Reading – Psalm 139:1-10, Romans 8:21-35, 37-39
Confirmation Sunday, April 29, 2018
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The first scripture reading on this Confirmation Sunday is Psalm 139:1-10. The psalmist reminds us that God is present with us wherever life takes us. This is the Word of God.

1 O Lord, you have searched me and known me. 2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. 3 You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. 4 Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. 5 You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. 7 Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? 8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. 9 If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, 10 even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. Amen.

Our second scripture reading is Romans 8:31-35, 37-39. Speaking from his heart and personal experience, the Apostle Paul affirms the God who is totally for us. Hear now God's holy word.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? God who did not withhold God's own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will God not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Christ 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. Amen.

The title of the sermon
Can't Take That Away from Me

The text: *See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are.* 1 John 3:1

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, today we celebrate the gift of belonging to you and to one another as your beloved children. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Louie Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday are favorites in the Kieffer household so one might hear the song to which this sermon alludes while sitting around our dining room table.

They Can't Take That Away from Me was written in 1937 by George and Ira Gershwin. Along with Louie, Ella and Billie, this timeless song has been sung by Frank Sinatra, Harry Connick, Jr., Rod Stewart and Diana Krall. And thanks to the collaboration within the Westminster worship team, Diane Dietz has agreed to sing it to us this morning accompanied by Dale Rogers.

*The way you wear your hat, the way you sip your tea, the memory of all that-
No, no they can't take that away from me*

*The way you hold your knife, the way we danced till three, the way you changed my life-
No, no they can't take that away from me*

*The way your smile just beams, the way you sing off key, the way you haunt my dreams
No, no they can't take that away from me*

The basic meaning of this song is that even if lovers part, though physically separated, the memories and experiences they share cannot be taken from them and will always be a part of who they are. The song affirms the human experience and the gift of memory which sustains us amid the joys and the sorrows, the triumphs and the losses which are a part of each of our life journeys.

Today we welcome young people who profess their faith and begin a journey of a lifetime in their walk with Christ, with experiences and memories yet to be made. We gather to remind them and each one of us of what cannot be taken away.

Where ever we find ourselves on our faith journeys today, the words of Psalm 139 and Romans 8 provide an important perspective on that which cannot be taken because of who we are and whose we are.

A Presbyterian minister recalled his mother's words to him when she would drop him off at school or a sports event or a friend's house. As he got out of the car, he would hear his mother's voice, saying... "Remember who you are..."

It wasn't until some years later as he reflected on this experience that he began to understand what his mother was saying. In retrospect, he thought...it wasn't that my mother was afraid I was going to forget my name. It wasn't even really that she was afraid I would step out of bounds and push the limits of what was acceptable behavior...although this might have been a small part of it.

No, what my mother wanted me to remember, he recalled with affection, is that I am a child of God. I belong to a God who loves me and who will be present with me no matter where my journey leads. *If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.*

What my mother wanted me to remember, is that I belong to a God who joined me in my humanity and who conquered death by dying on a cross...a God who forgives, who provides new beginnings and second chances. *Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Christ who loved us.*

What my mother wanted me to remember, is that I belong to a God who calls me to be a witness to what I believe, living out my faith in acts of kindness and generosity, treating others as I would like to be treated...with dignity and respect.

And so today, we, the congregation of Westminster Presbyterian Church join this wise mother, and say to each one of you. *Remember who you are, no, no they can't take that away from you.*

As you go out into the world, pursue your dreams, live your potential and you will make a difference. You will face disappointments and losses along the way, but when you fall, by the grace of God, you will pick yourself up and start all over again. Why? ...because you are a child of God. The Spirit of the Lord is upon you. You are embraced by the grace of God. There is nothing you can do, there is no place you can go that will be able to separate you from the love of God, in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Remember also, that you are a child of this congregation. You have a home in this faith community. Here you will find nourishment and strength for the journey and you are always welcome

In closing, I would like to share lyrics from another song with a similar title called "Take Away." It was written by contemporary Christian musician David Bailey, the son of a Presbyterian missionary and respected theologian, The Rev. Dr. Ken Bailey.

In 1996, while in his twenties, David was diagnosed with brain cancer and given fewer than two years to live. David received a combination of traditional and experimental treatments at Duke University Medical School that brought amazing, miraculous results and the gift of remission. His story is told by Dr. Sanjay Gupta, Neurosurgeon and Chief Medical Correspondent for CNN in his book about medical miracles called Cheating Death.

Following his diagnosis David quit his corporate job, picked up his guitar, and began writing songs. For the next 12 years David crisscrossed America and Europe sharing his journey to places he never intended to go and giving words of hope and faith for our own journeys, reminding us of who we are and what cannot be taken away.

You can take away all of my possessions
You can take away fortune and fame
You can take away all of my ambition
You can even take away my name

You can take away the country where I'm living
You can take away my home and my land –
You can take away the thoughts that I am thinking
You can take away my feet and my hands

Take away the dreams that I am dreaming;
Take away the visions that I have caught
Nothing you can take away can change the truth:
I'm a child of God.

Take away the anger and the hatred;
Take away the bitterness and fear
Take away the madness and mystery;
Take away the sorrow and the tear

Take away the music and the colors;
Take away the people I adore
Take away the work that keeps me busy;
Take away all of this and more

No matter when, no matter where;
No matter what burdens you can bear
I know what I say is true:
I'm a child of God—and so are you.

See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are. Amen.