

Stickum

Reading from the Old Testament: 1 Kings 3:5-12

Reading from the New Testament: Romans 8:26-39

Are you ready for some football? NFL teams have reported for training camp, local high school gridiron greats are sweating rivers out under the angry sun, retired jocks and football nerds are clogging cable and the blogosphere with their hyperventilated, hyperbolic prognostications, and Amazon drivers are feverishly delivering the freshest uniforms, the techiest helmets, the dopest cleats, and all the other essential gear necessary for Friday Night Lights.

If you play wide receiver or cornerback, that means getting your hands on what has become a most essential piece of equipment — the Nike Vapor-Jet 7.0 Receiver Gloves with Magnigrip Palms that provide “a stickier surface for maximum catchability.” Or, maybe those wideouts would prefer — the Adidas Adizero 12 Big Mood Football Gloves with “Adidas exclusive GRIPTACK palm technology for unparalleled grip and performance in all weather conditions.” In any case, don’t leave the locker room without them.

You see, it is relatively common these days to see receivers snagging passes one-handed. That wasn’t always the case, and it’s not that today’s

players have softer, surer hands. Call it Magnagrip or call it Griptack, but it's a tacky surface that provides a greater level of friction, making it far easier to seize a football flaming by you. Before the gloves, a 60 mph Sonny Jurgensen spiral would fly through your hands like a bullet through butter.

Until it was made illegal, an earlier generation of wideouts used something called Stickum, a glue-like adhesive that came as a spray or a paste that would allow you to snatch a ball just as a fly strip snags a fly. Hall of Fame receiver Fred Biletnikoff was known to not only coat his hands with it, but also a good portion of his uniform — socks, thighs, sleeves — anywhere the football might make contact. He used so much of it I wouldn't have been surprised to see him coming to the sidelines attached to a hawk that flew a bit too low. Stickum.

What is it that you want to hold onto? A job? The past? Your kids? A purpose? A spouse? A dream not yet fulfilled? A goal not yet achieved? A priceless heirloom? Youth? Your dignity? Guys my age just hope we can hold onto our pants! Gravity gets to be a real problem.

We hold onto memories, grievances, wounds, bucket lists, friendships, convictions, *pffft!* guns, habits, idols, prejudices, addictions, quirks, and

doubts. But what about belief? That can be a challenge in a world where far too much religious fervor is destructive, judgmental, nationalistic, and downright hateful. Holding onto belief can be difficult among an enraged populace, in an environment rife with misinformation, or in a war-torn, terrorized world. How do we hold onto faith in a time when in so many places, evil seems to have the upper hand?

But maybe that's the wrong question. Today, Paul suggests that the more important question centers not on the belief we hold onto, but rather, but on who holds onto 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 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."

Nothing will separate us... And perhaps most significantly, that includes that most tenacious force seeking to sever us from God ... us. When Paul asks — "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" — our

response seems to be — “Well, I’m sure gonna give it my best shot!” We are as easily distracted as a beagle on a forest trail. Our attention has no span. We are darting to and fro like a shoelace being laced, pulled back and forth by the next shiny thing, the loudest fear evangelist, the latest trend, the promise of riches, the popular crowd, the idol of the moment, the “guaranteed” good deal. It is not our grip on God that saves us, but God’s grip on us. “Where can I go from your spirit?” — the Psalmist asks — “Or where can I flee from your presence? 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.”

Years ago, the Fuller Youth Institute came out with a program they called *Sticky Faith*. The stated intention was to offer “a powerful strategy to show parents and ministry leaders how to actively encourage their young people’s spiritual growth so that it will stick with them into adulthood and empower them to develop a living, lasting faith.”

A laudable goal based on extensive research. The website proudly asserts that — “Sticky Faith is an innovative, research-based, and extensively

field-tested movement designed to equip parents and ministry leaders with insights and ideas for nurturing long-term faith in children and young people. Because of the Fuller Youth Institute's six years of research with more than 500 young people, 100 churches, and 50 families, our Sticky Faith resources are a 'must have' for churches and families eager to point their young people toward long-term faith." Impressive to be sure. Indeed, it's rare to find a youth leader without a copy of *Sticky Faith* on their bookshelf.

However, a field tested, evidence based program is not the basis for the guarantee Paul declares here in Romans. Don't get me wrong. Paul would be all in on a program like *Sticky Faith*, because Paul was all about organizing, coordinating, offering resources and strategies for churches and members so that they may build upon and live into the life-giving gift God had given in Jesus Christ. There's a chance we wouldn't be here today were it not for Paul's gift for organizing and resourcing.

God knows that. That's why God called Paul in the first place. Paul's gift for organizing was such that God called Paul in spite of the big red flags on his resume. Remember, this dude was the enemy of the church. Paul was

sending S.W.A.T teams into homes where there was even the slightest hint of Jesus devotion, dragging men, women, and children to prison. Yet, God saw something in Paul's passion and skills that led the Lord to confront Paul on the Damascus road with an offer Paul, quite literally, could not refuse. God looked at Paul's stat sheet and said, *I can use that*. And so God did.

Yet, even Paul understood that his passion and skills were no match against the transformative grace of God. This Pauline understanding is expressed clearly in both Romans (*While we were yet sinners, Christ Jesus died for us*) and Ephesians (*By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us...*) This same understanding infuses today's text (*Those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.*)

Paul understood something important. God is not content to wait for us to claim God. So, God takes the initiative and claims us. God is patient with us in so many ways, not the least of which is God's patience in waiting for us to claim him. Yet, the one place God's impatience is obvious is in the

truth that God refuses to wait to claim us. As with Paul, God knows our value, sees our gifts, and in spite of the red flags on our resumes, declares — *You are mine ... and I will not let you go.*

Granted, our response so often resembles the ego of that idiot friend of yours, something like — *Won't let me go! Oh yeah? Hold my beer ... Watch this.* We rebel, declare free agency, ignore the signs, claim credit where it's not due, anything to maintain the ruse that we know what we are doing ... And yet, God will not let us go. God knows what God's got, and God is not letting go.

Those sweaty football players are out there enduring all these drills to toughen them up, strengthen their grip. One of the drills sends a running back carrying a ball through a phalanx of beefy defenders, all competing to slap the ball out of the running back's hands. That's why, pound for pound, the running back is often the strongest one on the team. And yet, just ask Ernest Byner if that strength is full-proof. Byner was among the strongest players of his era, a gifted bruising running back for the Browns, but despite his strength and great career, he is most remembered for a fumble in the '87 championship game near the goal line at the end of a great run. So close to

tying the score, Byner was sliding past Denver Bronco's cornerback Jeremiah Castille who just managed to reach out and strip the ball from Byner's muscled arms, thus stripping the Cleveland Browns of their title hopes. It was supposed to be a safe play to run, the ball in the grasp of a player of great strength, but human strength is finite, our grasp is always limited.

It is not so with God, whose grasp is such that the Lord will not lose hold of us. I came across a note in a student Bible (*The Guidebook, NRSV Student Bible*) this week, a paraphrase of our text, a text that remains our assurance and hope even when the hold of our *Sticky Faith* falters. The student prays, "God, what could separate me from your love? Not a failed test or a broken promise or a hurtful insult. What could tear you away from me? Not the lure of popularity or unnatural highs. If you are on my side, who could be against me? Not a vengeful peer or an uncaring date or someone who has turned against me. What situation could divide you and me? Not depression over a loss or anger over being laughed at or guilt from being caught red-handed. No, in all these things, I know I'm never alone ... I'm convinced that nothing, absolutely nothing, will ever separate me from your love ... ever!" Amen.