

Romans 5:1-5

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

3 And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?

Learning a new language has a significant side benefit. You become more proficient in English. When you learn the rules of a new language you have to brush up on the basics of the English language.

I attended the adult Sunday school class on the religions of the world last week and came to the conclusion that the same is true when it comes to faith. Learning what people from other religions believe helps us understand what is distinctive and important about the Christian faith.

If someone would ask you, "How is the Christian faith different from the other religions of the world, how would you answer?"

One of our members faced that very question in, of all places, the parking lot of a Publix grocery store. A member of a fringe religious group asked her to say what she believed even as her ice cream was melting!

"So," I asked, "What did you say?" She replied, "I just paraphrased the Apostle's Creed."

"How did they respond to that?" She said with a smile, "They left me alone!"

And they say theology doesn't have practical benefits. Her ice cream was saved because she knew her theology.

It is important to know what we believe. That's the reason we repeat a creed each week. And all of our creeds and confessions, all of our statements of faith have one thing in common.

They are Trinitarian in nature. All of our creeds and confessions are organized around this basic belief.

Take the most familiar example, the Apostle's Creed. It is divided into three distinct parts. I believe in God the Father. I believe in Jesus Christ. I believe in the Holy Spirit.

Each year we celebrate Trinity Sunday. And each year we sing the same hymn, "Holy, Holy, Holy" "God in three persons, blessed Trinity."

God was in Christ. And Christ is in us through the power of the Spirit.

Like the Apostle's Creed, today's lesson from Paul's letter to the Romans is a good summary of the Christian faith, and it is Trinitarian in nature.

JUSTIFIED

But, Paul begins with a statement about grace. He writes, "We are justified by faith."

The word translated "justified" was often used in a legal context. It means to be pronounced righteous or to be acquitted in a court of law. But, notice that the passage does not tell us that we are justified by our good deeds. We are justified by faith. We have faith in the promise of God that in Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

This lies at the heart of the Christian faith and distinguishes it from other religions.

Many other religions say that we must do enough good works to reach God or be accepted by God.

But, Christianity says that "while we were yet sinners" God in Christ comes to us. He dies for our sins on the cross. He gives us what we could not obtain on our own, forgiveness.

That's grace.

A pastor during the American Revolution was a friend of George Washington. In the pastor's hometown there was a man in his congregation who was one of those thorns in the flesh that all pastors know about.

This fellow did just about everything he could to oppose and humiliate the pastor.

But, one day this troublemaker was arrested for treason and sentenced to die. You would think that the pastor would have been relieved to be rid of his nemesis.

But, instead he traveled over seventy miles on foot to Philadelphia to plead with General Washington for the life of this traitor.

After Washington heard his plea, he said, "I'm sorry. I cannot grant the life of your friend."

The old preacher responded, "My friend! He's the worst enemy I have."

Washington was astounded.

“You’ve walked seventy miles to save the life of an enemy? That changes everything.”

Washington granted the pardon.

And the pastor walked home with the man who had been his enemy. But, now they were friends.

Grace changes everything.

The first word in the English translation of our lesson for today is “therefore.” Justification is God’s big “therefore.” In a world marred by sin, God sent Jesus. Therefore, things can be different.

We don’t have to live in our guilt, desperately trying to justify ourselves before God and others. We are saved by grace through faith.

And since we are justified by faith this enables us to live in a different way.

PEACE

There are certain benefits come from believing in the power of God’s grace. First and foremost we have peace with God.

Later in Romans Paul puts it this way, “If God is for us, who can be against us?”

We learn in Jesus Christ what we could not learn anywhere else.

God is for us. God loves the world. God loves His creation. God loves us.

What is the one thing a good parent must impart to his or her child? I love you. I am for you. No matter where you go or what you do I am there for you.

If children can believe that, they will be at peace and will have the confidence they need to attempt great things in the world. And they know that if they fail there is at least one person who loves them and is for them and will help them in any way possible.

But, if children do not believe that, if children believe that their parents do not care or even worse that their parents do not even like them, then they will approach life in an entirely different way. They will approach life with a sense of uncertainty and fear.

The same is true when it comes to faith. Our view of God (or our belief that there is not a God for that matter) will influence how we approach life.

We believe the truth is this: God sent his Son, Jesus into the world so that we could know that He loves us and is for us. And this gives us peace.

In another letter Paul calls this peace a “peace that passes all understanding.” In other words, this is a peace that comes from above and is not subject to “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.”

HOPE

And that peace also gives us hope. Paul writes that we boast in “the hope of sharing the glory of God.”

Humanly speaking the word “hope” is weak word.

The best we can hope for is to live out our days in peace. Our best dreams may not come true, but we hope that our worst fears do not come true either. We hope that when our lives end that we will be remembered for a little while for the good that we did.

But, the peace of God as revealed in Jesus gives us a greater hope. We have hope not only for this life but also for the life to come. We have a hope that is eternal, “a hope of sharing the glory God.”

The Greek word translated “hope” is a strong word.

Hope means a confident expectation. We believe in, we trust in the future because it is God’s future. And we base this hope on the actions and promises of God made in the past.

I like the colorful way Frederick Buechner describes this hope. He writes,

“Hope stands up to its knees in the past and keeps its eyes on the future.

There has never been a time past when God wasn’t with us as the strength beyond our strength, the wisdom beyond our wisdom ...

To have faith is to remember and wait, and to wait in hope is to have what we hope for already begin to come true through our hoping.”

SUFFERING

We know of course the objection to such visions of peace and hope.

What about the evidence to the contrary? The world that God made is certainly not all that peaceful or hopeful.

In fact there is a lot of suffering in the world.

The Christian answer to suffering is this: God created the world, but the world is not God. The Creator made human beings in His image. But, human beings are different from God and they have chosen to deny God.

In other words, we are sinners, and sin is responsible for much of the suffering in the world. Suffering is often due to the fact that God has given us the terrible freedom to make our own decisions.

And we often choose unwisely. We sin, and that causes untold suffering.

In addition to this, the forces of nature cause suffering. Often suffering comes because we are mortal. The Bible tells us that the flesh is weak.

The fact that many people suffer causes some to deny the very existence of God. This is a prominent argument of those who aggressively claim to be atheists.

But, the Christian hope of life eternal helps us look at suffering in a different way. If God was in Christ, then we see in the life of Christ that suffering need not (in the end) produce despair.

Indeed, suffering can (in God's hands) produce salvation.

Christ's suffering was real and deep.

He prayed to find another way other than the way of the cross. On the cross Jesus did indeed think that God had abandoned him. The world turned dark, and it seemed that sin and despair had the final word.

But, sin and suffering and death did not have the final word. God had the final Word.

The final Word was a Word of hope and life eternal. The angels said, "He is risen."

That changed everything forever.

And this means that we interpret our own suffering through the lens of this eternal hope. Paul wrote that we "boast" or we "glory" not only in our hope but also in our "sufferings."

That seems like a strange way to view suffering. Some religious traditions have flirted with the idea that suffering is somehow payback for sin. If that is true then suffering people would have to wonder,

"What did I do wrong? What did I do to deserve this?"

Job's misguided friends suggested that he undertake this kind of self-examination.

But, for those who are justified, made righteous by the faithfulness of Christ suffering is not a sign of God's disfavor. Indeed, in the context of God's grace, suffering can strengthen the resolve and faith of those enduring it.

Paul sees a connection between suffering and hope. He wrote, "... suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character, and character produces hope."

In Romans 8 Paul will say, "The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory about to be revealed to us."

This is important.

Suffering is not some perverse kind of spiritual aerobics. Paul is not saying that we rejoice because we are suffering. We rejoice because we believe suffering will not have the last word.

Suffering does not produce our rejoicing or our boasting in the glory of God.

But, suffering cannot squash that joy either. Indeed, in God's hands suffering can actually lead to a deeper sense of hope.

HOPE ON THE EDGE OF DARKNESS

Now I know the objection to this. Suffering does not automatically lead to hope. Suffering, even for those who are believers, can lead to despair.

But, I believe that hope always sits on the edge of darkness.

A philosopher once wrote, "In reality, hope is the worst of all evils, because it prolongs man's torments."

In other words, don't hope for anything because it only leads to disappointment.

But, Christians take the opposite approach. Hope is closest during times of suffering and despair.

And the only answer to despair is not denial but acknowledgement. The road to hope leads right through the path of suffering.

The time we spend in the deep dark cave prepares us to receive new life. It is that time that energizes the soul. This time of spiritual waiting that gives birth to new life, to a hope that is above and beyond what we can imagine.

This hope does not come from below, from what we can do or say. This hope comes from upon high.

SANCTIFICATION

And that brings us to the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. God was in Christ and through the work of the Spirit Christ is in us.

Today's lesson tells us that the Holy Spirit pours God's love into our hearts.

God not only forgives us in Christ Jesus. God not only justifies us; God also sanctifies us.

God was in Christ and through the work of the Holy Spirit God pours the love of Christ into our hearts. Thus, our salvation is a work of pure grace from beginning to end.

That last line in our lesson for today provides great comfort.

I have no doubt about the grace of God. I have no doubt about God's love and forgiveness.

But, I have great doubt about my own ability to show that grace to others. I am not so forgiving or gracious or loving. Often, I do not live a life worthy of the gospel.

And yet I still have hope. I still have a confident expectation that God's will can be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Why?

God was in Christ and the Spirit of Christ is in us.

God pours his love into our hearts through the gift of the Spirit. What we cannot do for ourselves God still does for us. The power of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is not limited to the past. It is a present reality through the power of the Spirit.

Today is Trinity Sunday.

Today we celebrate the fact that the God who created everything forgives us in Christ Jesus and frees us through the power of the Spirit to live a life of love and joy.

God in three persons blessed Trinity.

Let us rejoice in that hope.

Amen