

August 4, 2019
Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore

“Unbelievable”

Romans 5:1-11
Rev. Dr. Tom Blair

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

And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope 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.

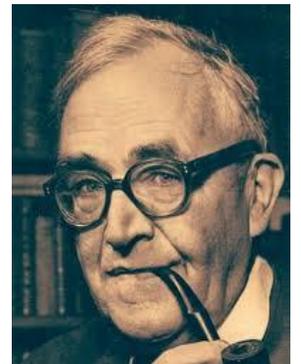
For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.

But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.

But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Some say that the letter to the Romans is the most important letter the Apostle Paul ever wrote, even the most important letter in “Western Civilization”, if not all of human history. If this passage is any measure of the depth of thought that is shared throughout this piece of correspondence, I would dare you to find another nominee.

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth once said that chapter 5 of Romans is the most important chapter of the Bible. If printed pages are any measure of the importance of a Biblical passage, I would venture to say that more commentary has been written in regard to these words of Paul than any others. (If you ever go over to the theological library at St. Mary’s Seminary on Roland Avenue and take a stroll through the carrels, you’ll be amazed to see how many rows of commentaries have been written on Romans!)



So it is a daunting task to preach on this text this morning. One commentator I read suggests reading this passage aloud over and over, three times for the congregation, and then having the congregation read it aloud a few times yourself. Letting the words flow over, through and into your being would be a sufficient devotional exercise; so says someone. That’s an interesting idea, but I’ll pass on that.

Admitting that these are the greatest words penned by the Apostle Paul, (or really, dictated by Paul and taken down by the scribe, Tertius (16.22), will have me approach this sermon a little differently than usual.

Since this section of Paul's letter essentially deals with the issue of Christian identity; who we are in Christ and then how we are to live, I think we might be best able to relate to the essence of the message through stories. Let me share a few.

Jenn has already shared with the kids how it is that "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us" (v.5:5), which is a powerful image in and of itself.

So here's a story about how important it is that we are known by Jesus, the one who lived and died- and was raised to new life, for all of us. This is a story shared at a breakfast table the other week while I was at my continuing education conference in California. It was told by a second-career Pastor, a man who had been a very successful businessman and consultant in his 'previous life.' He was preparing to celebrate the first 10 years of his consulting business and had a number of 'high profile' guests invited to join in the festivities. Among them was a former President of the United States. Facilities had been reserved and meals were planned. Receptions were organized and out-of-town guests were housed. They were ready to host this big event and talk with prospective clients about leadership and responsibility along with a very well-known individual who had managed complex issues from the Oval Office.

At 9:30 pm before the conference was to begin, he needed to make one final trip the airport to pick up one last guest, traveling alone from Philadelphia to be taken to his hotel. All he could think about was how special it would be to have a serious sit-down conversation with former President Gerald Ford! (This goes back a few years, doesn't it?) Knowing something about this last arriving guest, and aware that his company had on a few occasions been in a place for him to assist with White House transitions for both Democrats and Republicans, he asked if he knew President Ford, personally. The man was silent.



After what seemed an uncomfortable pause, the retired executive said the following: "Jim, the question is not 'Do I know President Ford?' but, rather, 'Does President Ford know me?'"

In an instant, the verbal exchange moved from his thinking that he was a well informed and well-connected host to feeling clumsy, awkward and even uninformed. He was confused and a bit taken aback by the response he received. So his next words confirmed his misunderstanding. He asked: "What do you mean?"

He explained. Hundreds of millions of people knew President Ford. But how many people would President Ford say that he knew?

Unless someone knows you, then you probably don't really know them. And unless there is some remarkable life connection between you and them, maybe that you came from the same town or went to the same schools, it's going to take a little something extra for that connection to make a difference, to ignite a spark in your relationship. This man was not asking directly if Gerald Ford was going to remember him from some previous meeting from years ago, but if the message the former President was going to deliver would relate to his current circumstance and that he would be keeping pace with the times and be meaningful to him in the here and now.

What this guest was looking for is something we all look for when we meet someone new or go to hear someone speak. We need a 'relate-ability factor.' We need more than just a famous name for someone to make a real difference for us. We need a meaningful connection- whatever it might be... something that reflects a legitimate connection between us, that we have something in common between us in a least some ways; that we're on a similar wavelength.

That's as far as I got in this conversation; it was time to go to our next meeting session. But the point was well taken.

It is not just who you know, but who knows you, and how. The key is that God knows us and that we know God. And so it is that we face the good news and bad news.

The good news is that God knows us. The bad news is that God really does know us, 'warts and all,' and the best news is that God sees us through the eyes of Jesus Christ.

The news that the apostle Paul shares with us are words we need to hear far more often than we usually do; that Christ stands with us in our trials and sufferings, even including those immortal words- that 'while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.'

This passage of Paul's is all about 'justification'; how it is that we are made right with God- not by anything we do ourselves, but as a sheer gift of grace by God.

God knows us, and the more we realize that, the better people we can become. And the more we recognize the gift of grace in our lives, the more we are able to see grace and good- ness in others. Here's a final story, another from my week in California, sort of.

I was fortunate enough to get tickets to see the hit play 'Hamilton' in San Francisco. It's been on tour for some time- even here at the Hippodrome, but I was fortunate to come across some truly discount priced tickets. So, yes, I was able to be 'in the room where it happened.'
(As the play refers to where some big negotiations were made.)

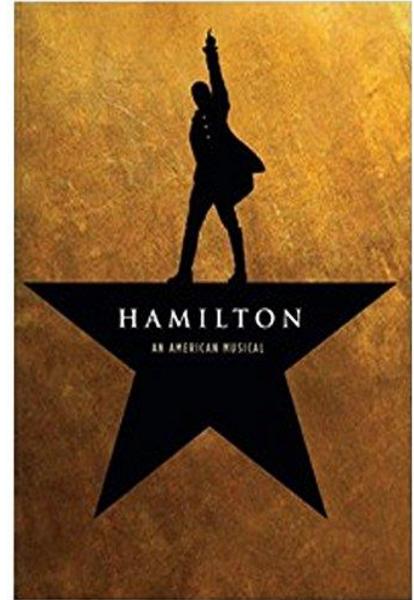
As a student of history and having read the book by Ron Chernow some years ago, this play was a 'must see' for me, and it led to a few days thereafter being mildly obsessed with searching out some more nuggets of history to go a bit deeper in the story. I discovered an episode of history I never knew about, one that relates to this theme of being known by God and responding appropriately. The story has to do with the command of General George Washington and how he decided to treat prisoners of war, as opposed to how the British treated Colonial prisoners.

Though I admit that I don't know that much of the personal faith of George Washington, I do know that he was widely regarded as a 'God-fearing' man and based his life on the highest ethical principles. Every morning he was said to have knelt to do his devotionals.

Long before the 'Geneva Convention' of the rules of war were drawn up (1929), Washington applied 'divine principles' to his management of the battlefield and thereafter, which led to surprising results.

After the battles of New York and Monmouth, thousands of American prisoners of war were treated with extreme cruelty by the British, many of them locked up on 'prison ships' in New York Harbor, poorly fed and often beaten.* (*David Hackett Fischer, Washington's Crossing*)

Yet, in contrast, after the battle of Trenton (Dec. 26, 1776), General Washington specifically ordered that both English and Hessian captives would be treated as human beings with the same rights for which Americans were striving. They were housed in tents, were well fed and relatively lightly guarded. The Hessians themselves were amazed to be treated with decency and even kindness, which led on their part to more desertions to the American side.



The moral choices made by General Washington in the War of Independence enlarged the meaning of the American Revolution. Later historians record that when questioned about this unusual and generous treatment of war prisoners, Washington simply replied that his decision reflected the mercy he was given by his creator. His was a simple and generous decision, appropriate for the moment, with implications far beyond what he anticipated. The precedent for mercy came centuries before, announced by the Apostle Paul in God's free, undeserved grace in Christ, given to us.

As much as anything, I think the Apostle Paul would be grateful to know that 20 centuries after his writing, some people still remember his words, and take them to heart. That God's mercy is also extended to us in Christ because of no merit of our own- but simply as a gift of God, is something we have the privilege of celebrating this morning. The mercy given us is the same mercy we are to extend to others. How difficult is that to do?

Today we are reminded of the gift of Christ's love given us at the table, celebrating a meal together; when forgiveness was made real and tangible for those who followed Jesus.

May this meal be a gift that instills, confirms and renews in you the mercy of God in Jesus Christ in your life, that you may know yourself to be one known and cherished by God, and that you will then share the mercy given to you with others generously; in Jesus' name.

Amen

