

Hope in Times of Tribulation
A Sermon on Romans 5:1-11
3rd Sunday in Lent
March 19, 2017

Introduction

Pastor's Class For the Rest of Us continues this week with another theologically dense passage from Romans. We have the key terms from last week's text: justification, righteousness, faith and grace. This week we add: peace, reconciliation, hope, glory, afflictions, the death of Christ, and the blood of Christ.

It's hard to deal with all of that, so last week we focused on grace. This week, I want to talk more about grace and focus on hope.

Can we be hopeful today? Our society seems to be more polarized than ever, our political system seems to be falling apart, and the world is struggling with what appear to be insoluble problems in climate change and mass migration of refugees. These problems will only get worse unless they are addressed soon. Are we naive fools for being hopeful in the midst of these tribulations? Or are we being faithful to the good news that Paul proclaims?

First Move: Standing in Grace

This is a transitional passage that looks back to last week's text on being made righteous by trusting in God as Abraham did. It also looks forward to Chapters 6, 7 and 8 on God's saving action through Jesus Christ. We will cover these texts this summer.

God has reached out in grace and made righteous those who trust in God's promises, just as God made Abraham righteous.

Being made righteous has a couple of consequences. First, it gives us peace toward God, which Paul explains at the end of this text. Second, it gives us access to the grace of God. The Greek word for access is used for approaching an emperor or a deity. God gives this access to anyone who approaches in faith. This understanding of grace reverses the cultural expectation that approaching either God or the emperor requires a high degree of purity or clout. This is unqualified access, open to the shamed and the honored.

Grace is a place where the faithful now stand. Paul describes grace as a sphere that we enter into, surrounded by God's continuing love. Think of it as a mode of

consciousness. Instead of looking at our surroundings as a thousand random things, we see the sacred running through all people and all things.

We are now filled with confidence. Paul says that we boast upon hope in the glory of God. In Greco-Roman culture, boasting was about one's own glory or about one's own family or group. The strong and the weak in the house churches in Roman had been practicing a competitive form of boasting. God's glory is true glory; it transcends the entire created order. The boast of those made righteous by grace concentrates on the future revelation of God's glory. Christians have hope that God's vision of the kingdom of God will be realized.

This hope, this confidence in God, gives us strength to bear our afflictions. The Greek word for affliction has the root meaning of a weight bearing down on us. The first-century culture saw suffering as a curse from the gods. Suffering is the opposite of glory. We see this in the book of Job. Job's friends tell him that if he is suffering, he must have done something wrong. His suffering is divine punishment. This understanding of suffering is the hallmark of the unredeemed world.

Paul encourages the faithful in Rome to boast about their afflictions. Affliction brings about endurance. The faithful can endure because they are standing in grace. Endurance is a mark of bravery. Paul uses military imagery in his letters to show that being faithful requires courage.

Endurance produces authenticity. Authenticity carries the sense of being tested in battle. Authenticity produces hope. Hope does not disappoint. It can also be translated as hope does not shame. In Christ, adversity has lost the power to shame.

Verse 8 is one of the most poetic lines in all of Paul's letters: "God demonstrates to us his own love in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Paul understands God's love and Christ's death as coalescing on our behalf. This is the way that God shows God's love for us. In Greco-Roman culture, the hero dies for the honored fatherland. Jesus died for undeserving sinners and tax collectors. He enters into their suffering and their shame. We need to be sure to hear Paul's voice here instead of the voices of his later interpreters, who saw his death as substitutionary atonement. In Paul's view, when Christ dies on behalf of others, it is by representation, not in substitution. Nowhere in Paul does he link the blood of Christ with forgiveness of sins. The blood of Christ in Paul symbolizes death as a gift that restores and equalizes all people. Jesus is the Messiah because he shares in the suffering and shame of the nobodies instead of trying to share in the glory of kings.

While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God. The Greek word for enemies also has the connotation of being hostile. God does not see us as enemies. The hostility comes from humans, boasting in the face of God. The cross reveals the

human attempt to seize honor for worshiping the creature rather than the Creator. It becomes necessary for the political elite to kill the Messiah rather than to allow their own hypocrisy and shame to be revealed.

The death of Christ makes peace possible by revealing the truth about the condition of the human race. His death for sinners and tax collectors overcomes their shameful status and renders unnecessary further boasting and competition for honor.

The Greek word for reconcile means to exchange one thing for another. Reconciliation has been achieved because the latent hostility against God has been exposed and overcome. In Paul's own life, his enmity toward God is transformed by divine love, and thereafter he took the gospel of reconciliation to the Gentiles.

Second Move: Grace Produces Hope

Our lives are transformed when we are standing in grace. Just as God's love fills us up and pours out of us, so does God's grace. Ward Ewing, an Episcopal scholar, says that all interpersonal relationships are created and sustained through grace. Just as we are unable to earn God's love, we are unable to earn another person's love.

The commitment of love is to set aside one's own needs to respond to the needs of the other. This is always a gift. To receive love, which is offered as a gift, the beloved can only accept it gratefully.

We think of love as being attracted to someone. What actually creates a loving relationship is acceptance of the other with his or her character defects as well as the character traits that we are attracted to. We avoid a spirit of judgment; that is destructive to a loving relationship.

When we seek to affirm our personal worth ourselves through works—making money, finding security, being honored and admired, or accomplishing important goals—we are likely to encounter isolation, failure, shame and even despair.

If we discover an identity based on a loving God, then our personal identity is founded on our humanity. Then we do not judge personal worth by comparison with others. We are motivated by the legitimate needs of others and of society instead of the quest to establish our personal worth.

We have peace because God loves us. We are able to accept ourselves as we are because we have experienced being accepted.

When we are standing in grace, we are hopeful about the future. Jurgen Moltmann, a German theologian, points out that since Abraham is the father in faith of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim peoples, these three religions are to be understood as religions of hope.

There are two foundations for Moltmann's theology of hope. Christian hope is based first on the memory of the suffering and death of Christ. God enters into the world of suffering. Second, hope is aroused through the resurrection of Christ from the dead. Hope pulls the promised future into the present and fills us with new powers.

Moltmann says that the Middle Ages emphasized a theology of charity and the Reformation a theology of faith. Today's task is to design a universal theology of hope that directs and prepares individual believers, the church, human culture and nature to the kingdom of God.

Third Move: Hope for the Kingdom

I feel like that is what Mary and I have been trying to for our whole ministry here: prepare us for the kingdom of God.

We have been standing in grace as an open and affirming congregation. We try to embody our covenant to welcome "all people of diverse race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and socioeconomic status to worship and participate fully in all aspects of church life in a safe, loving, nurturing and compassionate community." I have a hard time imagining anyone walking through our doors that you wouldn't accept and welcome.

We have tried to reconcile with nature by becoming a Green Chalice congregation. I wish we could do more with that. I would like to get a green team back together to come up with ideas for developing practices that are renewable and sustainable.

We replaced our constitution and bylaws with a design that embodies religious practices instead of corporate practices. Our board approves action by consensus instead of by a majority vote. If we have one or two serious objections, we back up and make sure we are all on the same page before we go forward. Imagine how different our politics would be if Congress and the Legislature tried to hear from all sides and get everyone to agree before they adopted legislation. Instead of power politics, which advances the group in power, we would have politics that focuses on the common good.

Our Wednesday night discussions on spirituality have dealt with the mystical tradition of the church. We have been focusing on the heart rather than the head. Instead of looking at the world dualistically, we have been trying to develop an awareness of the connections between all people and all things.

--- A skeptic might say, “That is all well and good. But what can one little church do about state and national problems like mass incarceration or global problems like refugees and climate change.”

I would say, it’s not just one little church. The congregations that are active in the Oklahoma Conference of Churches are doing similar things. When we go to General Assembly, we hear about Disciples church all across the country that are doing similar things. Churches *are* preparing for the kingdom of God. I like to think of them as a mustard seed that will grow into a wild, uncontrollable bush.

We *can* have hope about the problems that affect our nation and our world. Before God liberated the Hebrew slaves, he hardened the hearts of Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Perhaps that is what it takes to motivate people to take action. The contrast needs to be so clear that people finally recognize the ugly truth.

Refugees and climate change are becoming acute problems. When the new administration denies climate change and demonizes immigrants and refugees, when it cuts off all aid for climate science and for humanitarian aid to refugees, it may finally rouse people of good will from their complacency to do something about it.

That is what happened in the civil rights movement and in the movement to end apartheid in South Africa. Christian leaders like Martin Luther King and Desmond Tutu awakened people to the harsh realities of racism.

Conclusion

Standing in grace gives us hope in times of tribulation. Knowing that we are loved and accepted fills our lives with meaning and gives us strength to help build the kingdom. We want to share the good news of God’s love and acceptance with others, to all the children of Abraham, not just Christians.

Climate change, refugees and a broken political system are real problems that cause suffering for millions of people. Our hope lies in God. The same God that raised Jesus from the dead can heal the world of its brokenness.

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