

# “Unashamed Christian”

a sermon by

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Text: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16).

In the weeks following the attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001, an article appeared in the New Yorker Magazine entitled “The Tower Builder.” The article focused on a structural engineer by the name of Leslie E. Robertson, who along with his then partner, John Killing, was the engineer responsible for the building of the World Trade Center Towers that collapsed on that fateful day. In the weeks that followed the tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup> there was a good bit of discussion as to whether the towers had been built strong enough to withstand the kind of attack that was leveled on them by two large Boeing 767s traveling hundreds of miles an hour and loaded with more than ten thousand gallons of jet fuel. Most of the engineers who discussed this issue had concluded that at the time the buildings

were built it would have been difficult for anyone to anticipate the type of attack that took place on September 11<sup>th</sup>. Most of the engineers that had written letters to the New York Times commented that it was a testimony to the builders that the towers stood as long as they did.

For the most part, Leslie Robertson stayed out of the discussions about the buildings but on October 5<sup>th</sup> he spoke at the National Council of Structural Engineers. After his speech an engineer in the audience asked him, "Is there anything you wish you had done differently in the design of the building?" At that point Robertson broke down and wept at the lectern. Later Robertson wrote these words in an e-mail to one of his colleagues who had praised his design:

"Your words do much to abate the fire that writhes inside. It is hard. But that I had done more...Had the towers stood up for just one minute longer...It is hard."

The thing that struck me in reading about Leslie Robertson was that here was a person who had a sense of humility and shame and I thought how rare that it is our society.

A sense of shame is something that most of us don't have today. Most of us are not very willing to take responsibilities for our actions--particularly those that don't turn out well. Try to remember the last time you saw a politician take the blame for a failed personal or political action. What about the corporate leaders who bankrupted their companies while stuffing their own pockets? Have you heard Kenneth Lay or Jeffrey Schilling or any of the others actually say that they were sorry for what they had done?

Shame, the emotion of feeling sorry for what one has done, appears to be an endangered notion in our society today.

## I.

That is one of the things that stood out for me as I encountered Paul's letter to the Church at Rome. He begins that letter with greetings to those individuals who were part of the church at Rome. He gives thanks for their faith. He acknowledges that he hopes to visit them at some point in his life. Then he goes on to state something that is as critical for us today as it was for Paul those many years ago.

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16).

Now, I am sure that there were some things of which Paul was ashamed. He was ashamed of himself, and of many of his friends. He was ashamed of the Christian churches of his period, with their divisions and quarrels. He was ashamed of the moral decadence of the Roman Empire. There was, however, one thing of which he was not ashamed. He was not ashamed of the gospel of Christ.

There is something compelling to me in these words. Often I find myself ashamed--of my own actions and of others as well. Sometimes I am ashamed of the community in which we live--

county commissioners who cannot act with minimum civility, ashamed that in a city so wealthy there are so many who are so poor. Sometimes I am ashamed of the church with its pettiness and divisions--its lack of courage and conviction.

But there is one thing of which I am not ashamed. "I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the power of God for everyone who has faith--to the Jew first and also to the Greeks"(Romans 1:16).

## II.

For one thing, I am not ashamed of the gospel in its insistence of the tragic sinfulness of the human situation and our need for God's grace.

Now, sin is not a word that has a lot of currency today. Some of you will remember the story that is sometimes told of President Calvin Coolidge, a man of few words. One Sunday he went to church. When he returned, his wife asked him, "How was church?" "Fine," replied the President. "What did the minister preach about?" asked his wife. "He preached about sin," replied the President. "Well," his wife persisted, "What did he say about it?" "He said he was against it," concluded the President.

The New Testament is insistent that the real human predicament is not a lack of education, money, or prestige. The real predicament is that we all fall short of God's intention for us. "All have sinned," writes the Apostle Paul, "and come short of the glory of God." Dr. John Leith once observed that in the New Testament the great chasm between human beings is not "rich and poor," "the powerful and the oppressed," "male and female," "the free and the enslaved," but between those who know they are sinners and those who do not know. When Jesus was accused of eating with sinners and tax collectors, he replied, that the people who are well have no need of a physician, but only those who are sick.

Four hundred years ago Martin Luther wrestled with the question: "How can an unrighteous person stand before a righteous God?" Today, we are not likely to put the question in such a fashion. However, there are many people who come to church today because they sense there is a void in their lives. There is something they lack. They may not be able to identify this emptiness, but they sense that it is there.

Paul Tillich once defined sin as "separation." We are separated from God, we are separated from our neighbor, and we are separated even from ourselves. If sin is separation from God, then the gospel is the affirmation of God's acceptance of us.

Later in Paul's letter to the church at Rome he goes on to say, "Where sin abounded, grace did abound much more." He did not say these words to try to put a happy ending on a sad story, but he said that because in the picture of Jesus as the Christ, which appeared to him at the moment of his greatest separation from God, from others and from himself, he found himself accepted by God in spite of his being rejected. And when he found that he was accepted by God, he was able to accept himself and be reconciled to others.

That is the gospel and it is something of which we should never be ashamed.

### III.

Then, too, I am not ashamed of the gospel because of its insistence of the enormous power of vicarious sacrifice. The gospel is insistent that Jesus, through his death, gave to us the power of eternal life. His death was a sacrifice that we might have life.

The power of one person to sacrifice for another is one of the most impressive factors in the moral world.

This past year I saw the play "The Miracle Worker" that starred Hilary Swank at the Booth Theater. It is the powerful story of Helen Keller and her friend and teacher Annie Sullivan. Helen Keller was born blind and deaf. Consequently, she was never able to speak. She was imprisoned in a world in which she could not communicate until this teacher came into her life and, with great patience and skill, broke down the walls of darkness. Years went by and finally Helen Keller learned to speak and to learn. She graduated from college. She became a world figure known to everyone. All of this was the result of a person who was willing to give her life to enrich another.

To be sure, there are other things. Paul is aware of these as well. He speaks of human kind as "filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, maliciousness, envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, gossipers, slanderers, God-haters,"--the list goes on.

But Paul is convinced that there is something else. For him it is the power of the cross. That is a power that stands beyond all other powers. It is the power of one man giving his life for others. Martin Luther once distinguished between a "theology of glory" that emphasizes the human side, and a "theology of the cross" that emphasizes what God has done for us.

The notion of vicarious sacrifice runs throughout our lives. Every good thing that has been accomplished in science, medicine, social progress, and the home has come because someone was willing to sacrifice himself or herself.

William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, dedicated his life to the poor of London. At his funeral thousands of people--rich and poor--crowded the great Abbey to pay tribute to this man. As his casket was wheeled out, a poor woman cried out, "He cared for the likes of us."

The power to sacrifice is one of the most powerful forces in the world and we should never be ashamed of that.

## V.

Then, finally, I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is God's word that human life has meaning and purpose. The Gospel of John affirms that "the word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." That means that human life is a gift of God and that God gives your life and my life its meaning.

William Temple once observed that the ultimate option in the matter of faith is the choice between the faith that the universe is the expression of impersonal forces with no meaning, and on the other hand, the faith that the universe is the expression of purpose, intentionality and love. These purposes and love are revealed through the life Jesus lived in our midst.

Recently Dr. Armand M. Nicoli, Jr., a Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, has written a book entitled, *The Question of God: C.S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud Debate God, Love, Sex, and the Meaning of Life*. In this book Nicoli places the writings of Freud and C.S. Lewis side by side. Freud was an atheist. He believed that the problem of suffering precluded the existence of a God and that the belief in God was simply a human projection of the wish for a parent. C.S. Lewis believed in God. He believed that there was a door behind which, the secret of the universe is waiting for a person.

Christianity, at its best, is a radiant faith because it sees a profound meaning in life, worth living for, and if need be, worth dying for. What is the worst thing in a person's life? Is it tragedy? No, that can bring out a person's best. The worst thing is meaninglessness, seeing no sense or purpose in life, believing that life counts for nothing.

That is a problem which the Christian faith meets head on. It is an exciting, stimulating confidence in the meaning of life, its divine origin, significance, and destiny.

The Christian Gospel affirms that because God has created us, redeemed us, and provided for us our lives have meaning. We should never be ashamed of that Gospel. It is the power of God for salvation.

Amen!