

“Shattered Dreams”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
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Text: “This is the reason I have so often been hindered from coming to you” (Romans 15:22).

In Paul’s letter to the church at Rome there is a pattern that is typical of all his Epistles. He generally begins with a greeting (Romans 1:1-15). Then follows a major theological section in which Paul explicates the nature of the Christian faith (Romans 1:16-11:36). In this section, Paul deals with some of the most important doctrines of the church: the notion of salvation by grace through faith, the results of that reality of grace, and finally, the question about the Jews (Romans 9-11). Having spelled out the message of faith, Paul then in his letters turns to a series of ethical concerns relating to the principles and practices of the Christian life (Romans 12:1-15:13). He concludes his letter with a series of personal notes and a benediction (Romans 15:14-16:27).

This last section is where I want to focus our attention this morning. In this we get a glimpse into Paul’s personal life and his hopes for the future. In this section, there are three places that describe the entire life and ministry of Paul: Jerusalem, Rome, and Spain. His goal was to visit the church in Rome on his way to Spain. This was what he intended to do. But before he could visit Rome and Spain he had one task that he had to perform. He had to return to Jerusalem to deliver an offering that he received from the churches in Europe and Asia to alleviate the effects of a famine that took place in Jerusalem.

Jerusalem, Rome, Spain—that was Paul’s dream. He wanted to visit Rome because it was the capital of one of the greatest empires in human history. Rome was the center of the Western world. Spain represented something else. In the great Commission that Matthew records at the end of his gospel, Jesus says to his disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” That was Paul’s commission—to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. Spain represented the most western part of the known world. That was Paul’s dream. He wanted to take the gospel to the “ends of the earth.”

I.

It was a dream, however, that was not fulfilled. Paul, as far as we know, never made it to Spain. He did make it to Rome, but as a prisoner, where he resided for several years before his death. But his dream—to go to Spain—was never realized.

As a minister, I find that a good bit of my time is spent with people dealing with “shattered dreams.” Sometimes it is a young couple who more than anything want the gift of children, only to see that dream shattered sometimes for reasons they never fully understand. Sometimes it is a family who had dreams for a particular child only to see those dreams shattered by illness or some other struggle. Sometimes our shattered dreams meet us in the workplace, where the position we long for eludes us and suddenly we find ourselves stuck in neutral while others seem to be in forward. There are a lot of things that shatter dreams: divorce, death, illness, the list goes on.

Now, we do not know how Paul dealt with the disappointment of not going to Spain. Knowing Paul, it must have been a great source of disappointment. He had been through a lot: shipwrecked, beaten, imprisoned, stoned by an angry mob. And yet, like Moses, Paul was not allowed to enter the Promised Land. The gospel did reach Spain, but Paul was not the messenger. That dream of his, which he speaks about in the letter to the church at Rome, lay shattered.

So, what can we say to someone this morning who faces a shattered dream?

II.

One thing we can say that the last word in every human situation is the grace of God. God’s grace is not only forgiveness and renewal but also, as Reinhold Niebuhr says, “God’s providential working human history by which he makes the wrath of man praise him and transmutes good out of evil.” God says to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (II Corinthians 12:9). The human situation may become difficult, but there is always hope. On another occasion Paul wrote, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed” (II Corinthians 4:8-9).

This past week our congregation gathered on two separate occasions to mark the remembrance of two of our members who died within the past week. On Tuesday we held a memorial service for Ed Young, a long-time member of this church. Ed Young was an honor graduate of Davidson College who was a successful businessman, husband, and the father of three sons. For the past fifteen years Ed suffered from a very serious and debilitating neurological disease that forced him to spend the last years of his life in a wheelchair, with many of the normal functions of life no longer available to him. And yet throughout all of that he maintained a sense of dignity, courage, and determination in the face of a grave illness.

Yesterday, over three hundred people gathered to give thanks and remember the life of Julie Rayburn. Julie was the daughter of Bob and Susan Hill Rayburn. Bob Rayburn was a Presbyterian minister who served a number of churches in the Charlotte area, including this one. Julie was born with Down’s syndrome and lived with that condition for fifty-seven years. Some people might have seen Julie as “disabled.” She did not see herself that way. She carried on a remarkable relationship with scores of people in this church, sending birthday cards,

remembering deaths and illnesses, and endearing herself to all of us who knew her. In a very appropriate gesture, the Session of our church, which just met a short time earlier this morning, voted to bestow on Julie Rayburn the title of “Honorary Deacon.”

The lives of Ed Young and Julie Rayburn both bear witness to the Christian conviction that there is a grace, the living, active, personal presence of God, that is available in all historical events and in all natural events. This grace is the final word in every situation that allows a person even in the presence of “shattered dreams” to determine the significance of their life to achieve the purposes of God. This means that there are no dead-end streets in life in which evil is the last word, no enclosures from which there is no exit.

III.

A second conviction to which we should all cling in the midst of these “shattered dreams” is our conviction about the providence of God. Faith in God’s providence is another aspect of the awareness that God is personal. Our confidence in this aspect of God’s activity in our lives is not a reflection on our own experience. In fact, our own experience may appear to negate it. It is rooted in God’s presence in the saving work of Jesus Christ.

Paul Tillich, in his remarkable book of sermons entitled *The Shaking of the Foundations*, reflects on a situation that he faced after World War II. He was speaking of God’s providence to a group of Jewish and Christian refugees who had survived the war. One of the Jews who was present in that audience told Dr. Tillich that during the war he had received a telegram from Southern France, informing him of the horrible story of a sudden evacuation from Germany of nearly ten thousand Jews, all of the age of ninety or more, and of their subsequent transportation to the concentration camps. This Jewish man went on to say that the horror of this unnecessary misery prevented him from being able to find meaning in the notion that God could be active in human history.

Paul speaks of these forces. He knows them all: the horror of death and the anxiety of life; the ambiguity of the present and the inscrutable darkness of the future. But Paul knows something else. He knows that there is a creative and saving possibility in every situation that cannot be destroyed. He knows that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. That is what we mean by the providence of God. Providence affirms that the God we worship is a personal God, who knows us by name and who orders our lives and the world around us.

In just a few minutes we will sing the hymn “Now Thank We all Our God,” written by Martin Rinkart. The first verse of the hymn is this:

“Now thank we all our god with heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things has done, in whom his world rejoices;
Who from our mothers’ arms, Hath blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love, And still is ours today.

Martin Rinkart was a Lutheran pastor who served in his hometown of Eilenburg, Saxony or northern Germany from the time of his ordination in 1617 until his death in 1649. Those thirty-two years included entirely the Thirty Years War, which embroiled Europe from 1618 to

1648. That war was the context of his entire ministry, of all his preaching, teaching, and caring for the people.

The effects of that war are almost unimaginable. For instance, during those thirty years the population of Germany fell from sixteen million to six million.

The city of Eilenburg was not spared from destruction. It was a walled city, and as such, became a gathering place of many people seeking to flee the damaging effects of the war. But overcrowding, hunger, and disease followed them, even with the walls of the city. In the year 1637 as many as 8,000 people died in that city. The two other ministers serving with Rinkart died. Martin Rinkart was left to serve the city. That one year he conducted 4, 480 funerals, sometimes 50 a day. This included the funeral of his wife.

Here was a man who loved and cared for others. Here was a man who lived his faith in the midst of great suffering. Here was a man who could thank God even in the midst of great devastation and loss.

In his letter to the church at Rome, Paul raises the question “What can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ?” Then, almost immediately he begins to suggest the answers: “tribulation, distress, persecution, nakedness, peril or sword.”

The question today remains the same. What broken dream separates you from the love of God in Jesus Christ? Is it the death of a loved one? A divorce? The loss of a job? A relationship gone bad?

Paul reminds us that nothing, not even death itself, can separate us from God’s love in Jesus Christ. That is our only hope in life and in death.

Thanks be to God! Amen.