

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina
May 26, 2013 (Trinity Sunday)
Rev. Pendleton Barnes Peery

Hope
Romans 5:1-5

Our second scripture reading today is from Paul's letter to the church in Rome. As I read, I want you to notice the first word that Paul speaks: Therefore. "Therefore, since we are justified by faith..."

So often we hear and read scripture from a place of anxiety – an anxiety about ourselves, or our family, or our neighbors...an anxiety about our salvation. We worry if we will be included in God's promises of grace. We fret over how we have fallen short of God's vision for our lives. And sometimes, that worry and that anxiety can keep us from hearing God's word.

"Therefore," Paul starts, "since we are justified by faith..."

I don't want you to miss that this passage starts from the place of being saved. In fact, if you are a Presbyterian, that's where we start our entire journey of faith – from the place of being saved. Paul is clear that God's action to redeem us is in the past tense. It is done. We are saved. So, now what?

Listen with me for the word of God from Romans 5:1-5...

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Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 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.

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.

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Today we are focused on what it means to worship a triune God. God in three persons. The Holy Trinity. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

For something so central to our faith, you might be surprised to know that there are not too many places in scripture where the Trinity is mentioned. Today's passage

from Romans is actually one of the few. In five short verses each person in the Trinity is mentioned.

It is this infrequent mention in the scriptures as well as the difficulty in understanding, much less explaining, what we mean when we talk about the triune God that, quite frankly, has confused Christians since the very beginning of the church.

How is that we worship one God in three persons?

How does that work?

How do we not end up worshipping, or believing in, three different Gods? This was the question that plagued the earliest Christian believers.

One way to explain it was to think the Trinity as a hierarchy. First came God the Father, then came God the Son, then came God the Holy Spirit. The only problem with this thinking is that the Church considers it to be a heresy. If there was a time when God the Son did not exist, then it means that God the Son was created – like you and I were created – out of the same stuff of which you and I are created – and that means that God the Son would be liable to the same kinds of change and variation and sin that you and I face.

In order to address this heresy the Church did what it has always done...it formed a committee. This committee wrote the Nicene Creed; the creed that we say on the Sundays when we have communion. Here is the line that addresses the heresy of the day:

We say: We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father...

That sentence took 56 years to write – because when we are talking about who God is, it is important to be clear about what it is we believe.

Another well-worn try, in our attempt to understand the Trinity, is that we divide the roles of the three persons of God. We think of God the Father as the one who rules and judges, of God the Son as the one who loves and forgives and saves, and of God the Holy Spirit as the one who helps and guides. Continuing this line of thought, we often assign roles to each person on the Trinity. We think of God the Father is the angry one who wants to punish us, and of God the Son loves us and takes on God's punishment for us.

The only problem with this thinking is that the church considers it to be a heresy. When we think about God, we cannot separate the work of each of the three persons in the Trinity. God the Father is a ruler, a judge, and one who loves and sustains us. Yes, God the Son suffered on the cross for the sake of our sins because he loves us, and he stands as our judge. God the Spirit is not only involved in the private, "spiritual" parts of our lives and faith, but also in the work of creation and "real

world” kinds of things like justice and politics. Our conviction is that God does not work against Godself. “God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one God who in three different ways wills and does the same thing.”¹

I know, it is confusing. In fact, it has been said that every heresy in the church is at its heart a failure to understand the Trinity.

We don’t do children’s sermons in our church too often, but I will tell you as someone who did them for the past ten years in my other congregations, you don’t know fear and trembling until you give a children’s sermon on Trinity Sunday. The same is true with teaching the trinity to Confirmation or Catechism classes. Where most people usually end up is describing the triune God with words like: mystery, or ineffable, or – a Presbyterian favorite – sovereign. And while these are probably the best ways we can describe God, they don’t quite satisfy our desire to fully understand – to grasp – who God is.

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After my first year in seminary, and my first two classes in theology, in the summer of 2001, I had learned enough about the doctrine of the Trinity to preach the sermon you have heard thus far this morning. And then one summer morning, with one phone call, the things that I learned to think about our God in the three persons were all of a sudden transformed into the things I had to believe.

I was serving as the Youth Minister at a Covenant Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. I had been there a full year and had a chance to grow close to the middle and high schoolers. The Senior Pastor, Steve Goyer, was a mentor and friend of mine, and both of Steve’s girls were in the youth group.

On Saturday, July 28th, while I was on my way to the gym, my phone rang. It was Steve. There had been an accident. His wife, Nancy was on her way to one hospital. His teenage girls, Meghan and Amanda, were on their way to another hospital. Steve couldn’t be at both places at once and Nancy was in critical condition. Could I meet Meghan and Amanda and wait with them until he could get there?

Meghan, who was sixteen, had been driving the car. Nancy was in the front seat, and Amanda and one of her friends (also in the youth group) were in the back. The accident wasn’t Meghan’s fault – a van swerved into her lane on Interstate 285 and in her attempt to avoid it, the car rolled. About two hours after I arrived at the hospital to be with the girls, Steve showed up. Nancy’s injuries were too severe. She died the next day, July 29th. Eight days later, Steve stood in the pulpit on Sunday morning in front of a packed sanctuary and preached this:

¹ Guthrie, Shirley, *Christian Doctrine* (Westminster/John Knox: Atlanta) p.

"This is, what I have glimpsed," Steve said. "I've seen not a God who caused this, that predestined this and pulled the strings for the final outcome. Long ago, I lost my faith in a God who manipulates our every move, who swerves a white painters van across the path of Nancy's stupid Ford Explorer, causing it to roll over way too easily.

Luckily no one has yet to say to me, "It was God's will." If so, there might be two tragedies. But several have asked, "Why?" As if God did this, but "Why?"

"Why" will serve no purpose. God's answer to that question is the same as to Job: "Where were you when I created the universe?" It was chaos, a blip of disorder in an otherwise mostly ordered world. The only question now is, "What next?" Will God do something to redeem this? Will God pick up the broken pieces and fit them together into a meaningful puzzle? Will God tie up the hanging threads of our lives and weave them into a fabric of redemption?

My prayer now sounds like, "What next, God - will you be who you will be, the God of liberation, the God of reconciliation, the God of resurrection?" "What next" is my question, and the answer will come when it is time.

Read the Bible." Steve continued, "God doesn't will death, or suffering, or hardship. God wills life, health and redemption. Christ spent incredible energy trying to restore health in those he met, to bring wholeness and health to all the cosmos. Remember that salvation means wellness, shalom, peace."²

In the eight days between the accident and Steve's raw and powerful testimony from the pulpit, I learned a lot more about God than could be taught in any classroom.

It was my first personal brush with tragedy. Not my last, to be sure. There have been others, and there will be others. I am not alone in this respect. I know that most of you in this room – and that most of you who are watching this service on television or on your computers – have had an experience or two when it felt like your world was coming apart.

And when that happens – when the phone call comes, and your world shifts on its axis, and the weight of the tragedy leaves you breathless – when that happens, then you know the comfort of belonging to a God who is too big to wrap your mind around but who cares enough to wrap his arms around you.

Don't you know that it is when we are aware of just how not in control we are, and just how not independent we are, and just how not "together" we are that we discover the amazing grace of God. And when we have an experience of that grace –

² The Rev. Dr. Stephen Goyer, from his sermon on August 5, 2001. Steve is currently the Senior Pastor of Riverside Presbyterian Church in Jacksonville, Florida.

of our God who works in mysterious ways – our right response is not to try to comprehend but to allow ourselves to be changed.

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The apostle Paul writes:

suffering produces endurance,
and endurance produces character,
and character produces hope,
and hope does not disappoint us

As beautiful as these words sound, we have to be careful about how we hear them – and, especially how we share these words with people who are suffering.

What Paul writes here is not meant to be a general rule of thumb. They are not words intended to be on a t-shirt or a Hallmark card or to be used in a motivational speech.

Paul speaks these words in the context of a conversation about what it means to belong, body and soul, in life and in death, through joy and through suffering, to a God in three persons. Paul speaks these words in the context of a sermon on what it means to be saved.

As a friend of mine said well, for it is very clear that

“Faith does not protect us from the suffering of life. Everyday people wake up with their own sadness. It does sometimes feel like the bottom drops out. But, by the grace of God, we will always, always land on something solid. It was Quaker William Penn who said: We cannot fall beneath the arms of God. However low we fall they are still underneath us. Paul says we have obtained access to the grace in which we stand. Well, maybe we’re not standing: perhaps we are merely crawling, or curling up in the fetal position, or stomping our feet, or just laying there exhausted from it all---but there is ground there, there is support there, there is something there, someone there, there is grace that holds us up.”³

If you have seen that grace, or by way of your own heartbreaking experience of suffering, experienced that grace then you know something of the kind of hope that Paul describes.

It is a hope that does not disappoint. And that kind of hope has its source, not in us, but in the knowledge that we are God’s people and that he, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is our God.

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³ The Rev. Meg Peery McLaughlin, *The Well* 2013(Baltimore, MD).

