

SERMON: “Not Ashamed of the Gospel” Part 4
“Through the Looking Glass...of the Gospel”

March 14, 2010

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: Apart from your Spirit, O God, your word remains lifeless on the page. Grant to us now the grace of right hearing and right speaking, that by the power of the Holy Spirit we, too, may know the joy of your salvation and the wonders of your reconciling love; through Christ our Redeemer.

Old Testament Lesson: Hosea 11:1-4, 8-9

Epistle Lesson: Romans 5:1-11

Lewis Carroll’s classic children’s story *Through the Looking Glass*, is a sequel to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. As the story opens, Alice is playing with her kittens—one black and one white. As she is doing so, she looks up at the mirror that hangs over the fire place and begins to wonder what it might be like if there were another world on the other side of the mirror’s reflection. What would happen if she were to go “through the looking glass” into a world where everything was reversed? In her curiosity Alice climbs up on mantel of the fireplace and pokes at the mirror over the fireplace. To her surprise, she discovers that she is able to step through the mirror it into an alternate universe. Thus begins a new set of adventures for Alice in another Wonderland.

Though the Looking Glass and *Alice in Wonderland* are fantasies for children of all ages, whereas Paul’s Letter to the Romans is anything but a fantasy for people of any age. And yet in reading the 5th chapter of Romans, as we did this morning, I get the feeling that we have walked *through the looking glass* into a world where everything is different from what we might have expected. We have stepped into the “strange new world” of the gospel—the gospel that, Paul says, is **“the power of God for salvation to all who believe.”**

Come with me this morning into this new world of the gospel and see what it looks like when some of our common assumptions get turned upside down--two in particular.

Paul says, **“Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”** In other words, now that we have been put right with God, not through who we are or what we have achieved, but solely by entrusting ourselves to the faithfulness of God, we know that God is with us and for us in all things, and nothing in all creation can separate us from his love. So “We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” And in that peace, **“we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God.”**

Now there’s nothing upside down about that. It is exactly what we might have expected to hear in scripture. The “grace in which we stand” brings “peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” We’ve heard that countless times before.

But, as so often is the case, Paul doesn’t stop there. He knows well that the **peace** that is ours in Christ is not just an absence of conflict, and it is far from an escape from the turmoil of life. Just the opposite. Paul says, not only do we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God, **“we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us...”**

“We rejoice in our sufferings...” Or as the NRSV has it, “we **boast** in our sufferings.” It is easy to misunderstand those words, and to turn them into something they are

not. Paul is not suggesting that everything someone asks, “How are you doing?” you unload on them all the bad things that are happening in your life. That’s a conversation stopper, for sure! People who boast of their sufferings find few, if any, who are willing to listen for long.

Paul is not encouraging a sick kind of masochism—suffering for the sake of suffering. But he does insist that in the “looking glass world of the gospel” suffering is not the worst that can happen. In the fallen world in which we all live, “east of Eden,” suffering is woven into the very fabric of life. It is both a part of life in general, and even more it is a part of the life of “costly discipleship,” to which our crucified Lord calls us. **“Anyone who would come after me,”** says Jesus, **“must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever would lose his life, for my sake and the gospel’s, will save it.”** (Mark 8:34-35)

There is the suffering that comes from living in a risky, precarious world. And there is the suffering that comes from not being “ashamed of the gospel” in a world that lives by very different values. But either way, in the “looking glass world of the gospel,” suffering can lead to a deeper experience of the grace of God in Christ.

The gospel of which Paul is not ashamed assures us that even in the midst of the worst that may befall us, God is at work in our lives for whatever good can be achieved. Paul knows in his own experience, how that kind of tough-minded trust in the faithfulness of God can lead to endurance, hanging in there no matter what, and the endurance of faith can result in the strengthening of one’s character, and Christian character manifests a tough, resilient hope that can withstand anything that may come our way. The authentic hope of which Paul speaks does not come from thinking positive thoughts. It comes as a *gift* of **“God’s love that is poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”**

There are members of this church who have experienced what Paul is talking about in ways I can hardly imagine and can only applaud and honor them for their witness. In the midst of the worst suffering any of us can imagine, that of a beloved child, members of this church have borne a witness of faith that has blessed this whole community, and the whole extended community of the CaringBridge network. They are a living witness to the truth of everything Paul is saying here. The very things that would challenge and threaten to destroy faith have deepened and toughened and confirmed it in their lives beyond words. They, far better than I can, can say that in the “looking glass world of the gospel,” **“suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope, grounded in God’s love, does not finally disappoint us.”**

But even more, Paul goes on to say, even more in the “looking glass world of the gospel” our accustomed understanding of religion gets turned upside down, as well. No where does Paul make that point more forcefully than in the words we read this morning from the 5th chapter of Romans.

Paul most likely is dictating his Letter to the Romans to a secretary. He is thinking out loud as he goes. Sometimes he doubles back to finish a thought--sometimes he just keeps going and doesn’t seem to know when to quit. The point he is making, which goes right to the heart of the gospel, is that **“Christ died for the ungodly.” “Christ died for the *ungodly*.”** Even Paul seems startled by what he has just said.

How do you get your mind around such a thought, when all your life you have been told, and you have assumed, and as a good Pharisee you have taught, that the Messiah, the Christ, does not die, and he certainly does not die for the *ungodly*. The Messiah comes to destroy the ungodly, not die for them. God is on the side of the godly. God upholds the righteous, those who scrupulously keep the law of God. The very idea of a dying Messiah was almost unthinkable. And a Messiah who would die for the *ungodly*... that would be sheer nonsense! It would turn upside down the whole idea of religion itself.

I can almost hear Paul pondering that strange phrase, “Christ died for the *ungodly*? Could that really be true? Would anyone in their right mind give their life for an ungodly person? Perhaps, for a *righteous* person one might dare even to die. Soldiers in warfare have laid down their lives for a comrade. Passengers on United Flight 93 laid down their lives to keep the plane from being flown into the White House. But that is laying down ones life for one’s fellow citizens or one’s country. Not the *ungodly*!

What Paul is saying here is quite different from moral courage in the heat of battle. In the “looking glass world of the gospel,” Paul insists that Christ does lay down his life for the ungodly. In fact, says Paul, his doing so is the ultimate proof of God’s amazing love-- **“while we still were sinners, Christ died for us.”** The gospel doesn’t get any more radical than that. No wonder we have such a hard time getting it through our thick heads and hardened hearts.

“While we were still helpless, Christ died for the ungodly.” Fleming Rutledge calls that the “irreducible core...the heart and soul of the Christian faith.” But “Notice,” she says, “that it is the exact opposite of the good old American gospel, ‘God helps those who help themselves.’”¹ People are sometimes surprised to discover that that’s NOT in the Bible. It comes from Ben Franklin, not Holy Scripture. The gospel takes us through the looking glass into a completely different world, where God helps the helpless, and Christ dies for the ungodly...**while we were still sinners.**” As a lovely evening hymn puts it, “When other helpers fail and comforts flee, Help of the helpless, O abide with me.”

What do you make of all this? Does it trouble you? I know a number of people who find it very troubling. What good is religion, they ask, if not to assure us of our specialness in the sight of God? If there is “no distinction,” as we heard Paul say last week, if there is **“no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”** then we are all in the same boat together, the godly and godless, saint and sinner alike. We are **all** in need of the grace of God! All of us!

As I was working on this sermon, last Thursday I got an email from a member of the church who thanked me for my sermon last week and said how much she wished her father could hear and take to heart a word of pure grace. “I so deeply regret,” she said, “the ways my father’s life has been diminished by his constant fear that he can never be “good enough.”

I wrote her back to say that I find it very sad, even tragic, when religion is used in a way that misses what the gospel is all about--that none of us, literally **NONE of us**, is, or ever can be, "good enough," to earn the love of God. But nevertheless, **nevertheless!**, God is relentlessly faithful to God’s own great purpose of setting us right with himself, regardless of

¹ Fleming Rutledge, “No Religion Here Today,” *Help My Unbelief* (Eerdmans, 2000) p.112.

the cost. That rightness is not something we achieve by trying hard to be righteous ourselves. It comes simply as we entrust ourselves, as we are, to God's work of grace in our lives.

How can I say it strongly enough! You are not "good enough," you never will be "good enough," you do not ever have to be "good enough" by yourself. But Jesus Christ is! In the "looking glass world of the gospel," our religious strivings are turned upside down. Over and over Paul declares, while you and I were still helpless, Christ gave his life for the ungodly...while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Even while we were **"enemies of God, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son."**

We keep trying to turn the gospel into moralistic advice for us, or others, to follow. We keep using our religion to put God in our debt, as if God owes us salvation simply for pretending, or trying hard, to believe certain things. But the gospel is not about our religion, or our being religious. It is about God's utter faithfulness to us in Jesus Christ. While we were still sinners, while we were weak and helpless, "Christ died for the ungodly." It is simply not true that "God helps those who can help themselves," at least not in the "looking glass world of the gospel," where God helps precisely those who cannot help themselves and who know it.

A good many times in my career as a pastor I have had people, especially men, say to me, "I'd love to believe all that stuff, but I'm just not religious." I have always wanted to say, and sometimes have said, "Thank goodness you aren't! You can hear the gospel in a way that the conventionally religious cannot. You are in the best position of all to understand this gospel of which Paul is not ashamed. The gospel is the good news that God is not in the business of religion, keeping up appearances, shoring up an institution. God is in the business of transforming lives, of turning things right side up, reconciling that which is broken. Fleming Rutledge is right: "God does not sit at the summit of religious achievement, waiting for us to make it to the top; God is down in the valleys where sinful human beings are struggling with their daily lives."²

The Christian faith is not about our religious strivings to be "good enough," whatever that means, in whatever area of life you mean it. Christianity is a word of profoundly good news to those who know they will never measure up, either to the expectations of God or others. It is a word of amazing grace—that while we all of us were still sinners, Christ died for us.

He does not offer you "religion." He offers you **himself**. He does not seek to make you religious, but to make you **real**, so that you, too, may share in his work of reconciling all things in Christ. Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord in whom even **"we have now received our reconciliation."** In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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² Fleming Rutledge, "No Religion Here Today," *Help My Unbelief* (Eerdmans, 2000) pp. 113-114.