

Preaching

word & witness

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Scriptures

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

Psalms 8

Romans 5:1-5

John 16:12-15

Commentary

Romans 5:1-5

The original purpose of Paul's letter to the Roman Christians is highly debated in biblical scholarship. Some purport that Paul's concern was to explain to predominantly Gentile Christians God's wide-scoping salvation and historical plan for the ultimate inclusion of the Jews. Other scholars claim that the letter was written to a community of predominantly Jewish Christians who were struggling with what it meant to include Gentiles in their numbers. Regardless of this scholarly debate about the makeup of the Roman church, Paul does not write to this audience as its founder, but as one seeking to establish a new base of operation (after Ephesus) for western-bound missions. This mission base was never fully actualized, however, as Paul was martyred prior to its full development.

Paul refers back to Romans 4, when he explains that justification by faith and not the law is exemplified by Abraham, who received the blessing of God and had faith in God's promise in Gen. 15:6, prior to his circumcision in Gen. 17. Paul carries this notion to all believers; all who have faith, and not merely those who follow the law, are justified by God – they are children of Abraham.

In Romans 5:2, Paul frames salvation in Christ as having already been offered to God's people. Christians have obtained access to God's grace through Christ. Consequently, access to this grace offers the hope of sharing in the glory of God. It seems that Paul has envisioned Christ as having removed a barrier to affect the proximity of those who have faith with God. Paul proclaims that the church, the Christian community, stands in God's grace.

Sharing the glory of God also includes the experience of suffering. However, God's glory offers Christians the opportunity not to merely endure suffering, but to rejoice in it. In fact, Paul suggests that believers' character improves with suffering as endurance is created, and hope is consequently produced. This hope is bona fide because through this reconciling action of God in Jesus Christ, believers have God's love poured into their hearts through yet another gift, that of the Holy Spirit.

Psalms 8

This psalm is the only hymn in the Old Testament that is entirely a direct address to God. It is the first hymn of praise in the Psalter. The hymn is composed of two sections: vv. 1b-2 (extolling God's greatness) and vv. 3-8 (articulating the position of human beings within the divinely created order). The theme that bookends this psalm is "O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (vv. 1a, 9). The hymn is woven with these thematic expressions. The Lord mastered chaos and established the world; consequently, the world and all

that is in it belong to this cosmic creator and monarch. In verse 4, the psalmist asks what is the rightful position of human beings in the hierarchy of creation and answers succinctly (vv. 5-8). Having been created "a little lower" than God, the human being is insignificant when compared to the celestial bodies, yet the human is crowned with both glory and honor. Therefore, the human is manifested with dominion over earth's other animals (vv. 6-8).

John 16:12-15

The disciples will receive a clear, true message from Jesus through the Spirit about things to come. The Spirit's transmission will glorify Jesus (v. 14). The phrase "All things whatsoever the Father has are mine" (v. 15a) is unqualified and leads John's audience to see the Trinity in action. Jesus possesses from the Creator what he will declare to the disciples; consequently, he has the full authority to transmit what he has received to the Spirit. Ecclesial tradition holds that the statement "all things whatsoever" means that the Son Jesus possesses the total divine, and his and the Creator's transmission also give the Spirit the divine. Westerners understood the Creator and Son composed a single principle or source of the Spirit. Eastern tradition, however, has interpreted this Johannine passage as the Creator having transmitted the fully divine through the Son to the Spirit. Glory traditionally has been associated with the coming of the Messiah. However, John speaks of the Spirit's giving glory to Jesus before the eschaton, because Jesus has transmitted "what is mine," what he will announce to the disciples (v. 14).

Suggestions for the Liturgy

Call to Worship

One: With your hand you have guided us.

All: With your arm you have gathered us.

One: Now may your voice speak to our minds and hearts.

All: That we may become not only your sheep, but your faithful people.

One: We trust your love, that you will never leave us.

All: Now, let your Holy Spirit stir in us the fire to tell of all your kindness toward us. Amen.

Invocation

Holy, holy are you, O triune God: Father, Son, Holy Spirit; Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer; God beyond us, God with us, God ever among us; you are one God in three persons. The whole earth is full of your glory. Lead us today to a righteous and fitting worship that shapes us for our daily living and binds us ever closer to your heart. In your Son's name we pray. Amen.

Offertory Sentence

"If you put an end to oppression, to every gesture of contempt, and to every evil word; if you give food to the hungry and satisfy those who are in need, then the darkness around you will turn to the brightness of noon. And I will always guide you and satisfy you with good things" (Isa. 58: 9b-11a). Let us bring now our tithes and offerings to our Lord.

Offertory Prayer

Lord, giver of all that we have, these gifts are but the outward manifestation of the inner person we are. Let what is revealed match what is hidden, that in every generous act of gratitude your Son may be glorified. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

O Lord, we are like the disciples, doubting when faced with what we do not understand. Instead of turning to you, we look away. Aware of our inadequacy, we wrongly convince ourselves that we can do nothing. Holy Creator, we need your forgiveness; we need your divine patience; we need a new creation, a fresh start; we need to be reminded of your love demonstrated through your Son and our Savior. We

need to be inspired by the energy of your Holy Spirit, which never grows tired. You are our guide in times of conflict and you celebrate with us when we are happy. In the night you are the bright morning star and in the day, you are the sun of righteousness. Yet we cling to worthless idols: arrogance, pride, and self-reliance. Instill in us the essence of your very words spoken through the prophet: "In repentance and rest is your salvation. In quietness and trust is your strength" (Isaiah 30:15).

Benediction

"With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, but is patient with you." As you go from God's house today, be resolved to communicate God's love, be messengers of the Lord in all you say and do. And may God our Creator, Jesus the Christ, and the love of the Holy Spirit be with you always. Amen.

Hymns

Holy, Holy, Holy! (NICAEA)
Spirit of the Living God (LIVING GOD)
Gracious Spirit, Dwell with Me (LUX PRIMA)

Stories that Preach

The mathematics of the Trinity doesn't make sense. How can three be one? But that's the trouble with trying to understand the triune God by mathematics, for God can't be reduced to a formula.

Until within the past ten years, speech recognition was used mostly as a substitute for typing on home computers. Speak into a microphone, and your words (or something close to them) magically appear on your screen. But now the technology has improved to the point where businesses are turning to speech systems designed for use over the telephone. Speech promises to vanquish those frustrating touch tone mazes, reduce the costs of providing 24-hour customer service and, for the rest of us, change the way we interact with everything from PCs to home appliances.

"In the English language," the professor said, "a double negative forms a positive. In some languages though, such as Russian, a double negative is still a negative. However," he pointed out, "there is no language wherein a double positive can form a negative." A voice from the back of the room piped up, "Yeah. Right."

[Get it?]

The same English professor later wrote the words, "Woman without her man is a savage" on the blackboard and directed his students to punctuate it correctly.

Some of the men wrote: "Woman, without her man, is a savage."

Some of the women wrote: "Woman: Without her, man is a savage."

In language, sometimes perception is everything.

Why is it that when we talk to God we're said to be praying, but when God talks to us we're schizophrenic? — Lily Tomlin

The musical team of Gilbert and Sullivan were doing very well together until they bought a theater. Sullivan decided that it should be recarpeted; so, he bought the carpet, but Gilbert intercepted the bill. When he got the bill, he hit the ceiling. He took Sullivan to court because he felt that since Sullivan ordered the carpet without consulting him, he shouldn't have to pay for it. There was so much anger that neither of these men spoke again as long as they lived. When Sullivan wrote music, he sent it by messenger to Gilbert, who would pen the words and send it by messenger back to Sullivan. When they would have their performances, they would each come from opposite ends of the stage to take their bows, but never looked at each other. They never said a word to each other again as long as they lived.

What is the doctrine of the Holy Trinity but an affirmation of teamwork. One in Three and Three in One.

Children's Message

Reason to Glow!

Psalm 8: "When I look at the heavens ... the stars that you have established; what are human beings...? Yet you have ...crowned them with glory."

Concept: God the Creator of the universe cares more about us than about any other part of creation.

Do any of you like to stargaze? Yes, that simply means going outside on a clear night, and looking up! It can be done with a telescope or just by looking with our own eyes, and people have been doing this for thousands of years.

When it's a clear night and there are no other lights near us, our eyes can adjust to see so many stars – thousands! – more than anyone ever could count. Some of these stars look as though they are in groups that make patterns, and look like something to us. Not too long ago on such a night I saw a group of stars called the "Little Dipper" and I was so excited because I had not been able to see that for many years.

I mentioned that people have been stargazing for thousands of years, and that is true. The stars are often talked about in the Bible, because people would look at them and think about how awesome God had to be to have created everything in the sky, as well as everything here on earth. It's so amazing to think that people in the Bible were looking at the very same stars that we do. They even looked at the same constellations we do!

Of all the times the Bible mentions stars, today's scripture from Psalm 8 is the time that they are talked about most of all. The psalmist looks at the stars and thinks about how beautiful and majestic they are, and about how awesome God is for making them. And then the psalmist wonders, "How important can we humans be compared to that?"

There is a little poem that almost all children learn, that I'll bet all of you know. It is called "Twinkle, Twinkle." Can you say it with me? "Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are; up above the world so high,

like a diamond in the sky." Stars do seem to twinkle as we look at them, don't they?

I heard about a little boy who always got this poem mixed up. Here is how he would say it. "Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how you wonder what I are." That is all mixed up, isn't it? It says the star wonders about us, instead of us wondering about the star!

But do you know what? This little boy's mistake really isn't a mistake! This is exactly what the psalmist realizes is true! We – each one of us – are more important to God than everything else God has ever made. It's so important to know that and to always remember that. We have even more reason to glow than the stars do, because God loves each one of us with an awesome love!

Rev. Harold Steindam, senior minister of Westerville (Ohio) Community United Church of Christ for the past sixteen and one-half years, has used children's sermons each week as an important part of worship throughout his thirty-four years of ministry.

The Sermon

No Time for Chit-Chat

A phrase you don't want to hear from a co-worker is "This morning around the water cooler, I heard what you did last weekend." The water cooler used to hold a highly esteemed place in the hallowed halls of business folklore. It was the interoffice gathering point where people could freely get together, the temple to office scuttlebutt where people told their best fish stories or complained about the weather or gossiped about co-workers. We don't hear much about water coolers anymore. Now we lug cases of bottled water from our warehouse clubs to our cubicles and offices. We'll spend top dollar for imported seltzer of Eau de-this or something-Mountain that comes in kiwi or honeydew flavor and comes enhanced with vitamins E, C, and A. What we don't realize is that when we lost the water cooler, we lost a critical component of relationship – the chat.

Not too long ago our families gathered on their front porches, in the market, in the post office, on Main Street. They chatted with each other until Bell introduced the telephone. With

the phone our families could talk with someone in the next county. They were no longer exclusively dependent on the community for conversation, goods, and services. The rest is history – Ford's horseless carriage, the Wright brothers' aeroplane, movies, talkies, radio, television, computers, fax machines, call waiting, call forwarding, caller ID, the Web, e-mail, voice mail, and Bluetooth. The death of distance – the death of the chat.

Why, when we're ostensibly more connected than ever before, should we mourn the death of chat? Chat – real chat, live chat, face-to-face chat, not that through screens or through the filters of our own convenience – forms relationship, and relationship forms character. We can't truly live the faithful life without knowing how to form relationship, how to engage our character. We can't live the faithful life without knowing how to chat – chat with our neighbors, chat with our families, chat with the stranger, chat with God.

Paul's letter to the Roman Church is one about living the faithful life, living the life of love, living the life in conversation with God, living the life of transformation. Indeed, Paul's letter has a history of transformation. The epistle

to the Romans had a profound influence on Martin Luther, who preached on it each day for fourteen months, sometimes twice a day. Luther believed that this epistle was his gate to heaven, that it was the most important biblical text. It seems that this letter was widely circulated during Paul's time. Lore has it that John Wesley very reluctantly went to a Moravian church where he heard Luther talk of this letter to the Romans. During the sermon, Wesley was transformed by Paul's words and believed that his soul became sin free. Some scholarship supports the theory that Paul did not actually write this letter to the Romans, but that it was meant to be a circular letter to be carried throughout the Mediterranean world. Regardless, the letter as a whole supports continued relationships between Jews and Christians, and between gentile Christians and Jewish-Christians. Throughout the epistle, Paul speaks of the Christian character – our relationship with God and with each other. In our society, the concept of "character" carries a double meaning. We speak highly of those who have character; we speak dubiously about those who are characters – they are the ones who were often gossiped about

around the water cooler. Without a doubt, Paul had a prickly “character.” Yet no one would argue that Paul didn’t live a life of Christian virtue — full of power and worth and healing.

In the passage we read this morning, Paul links character to suffering, endurance and hope. Suffering, that is, suffering for Christ’s sake, produces endurance — or perseverance — or we might even say, a kind of inspired stubbornness. Have you had those moments of suffering in your life? You may not have had quite the suffering as the early Christian martyrs or saints felt, but each day many of us experience other forms of suffering — stress at work, financial struggles, abuse in a relationship, marginalization and oppression because of who we are. Through all of these struggles, we may feel alone — completely alone, as though we are left to endure these hardships and solve these problems by ourselves. Loneliness is pandemic in the United States. The dating service industry has tripled in size over the past ten years, with now over 4,000 agencies nationwide helping people to not be alone. Interestingly, one of the fastest-growing dating industries is the Internet dating industry — limiting any initial face-to-face contact to perhaps a photo and, at best, an e-mail exchange.

Do you sometimes not answer the door? With increasing violent crime in our neighborhoods, our society discourages us from answering our doors, let alone going over to our neighbors’ homes to chat. A little while ago, an e-mail circulated that shared a story about a Boston woman whose next-door neighbors were very thoughtful. They took care of many of her needs. When her lawn grew taller than hip-high, one of them sent their son over to mow it down for her. When her pipes froze and burst with the early arrival of winter, they had her water turned off. When her mail spilled out of the front door, they called the police. The only thing they didn’t do was go to her home to chat with her. The story goes that the police climbed up her dangerously crumbling stoop, broke in the side door of her little house and found what they believed to be the 73-year-old woman’s skeletal remains sunk in a five-foot-high pile of trash where they apparently had lain for as long as four years. One of her neighbors later said that she was at one

time a close friend. “She was alone and needed someone to talk to, but I was working two jobs and was sick of her coming over at all hours. Eventually I stopped answering the door.”

With so much emphasis being given to e-mail and voice mail, face-to-face chats seem unnecessary and even seem to be a waste of time. Our society seems fully atomized, individualized, decentralized, privatized, and even sterilized, so that there is no longer a need for the chat around the water cooler, the chat on the phone with family, the chat with friends about plans for the weekend, the chat with neighbors about coming with you to church. At the airport, you see the “non-chatters”: they walk stooped-shouldered, weighted down by their electronic devices strapped around their necks, stuffed under their arms, and lugged around by both arms. They have their laptop computers, portable fax machines, cellular phones, PDAs, BlackBerrys, iPods, and all sorts of other electronic devices — their buffers to keep from having to deal with the people directly around them. Despite the glitches and blowouts that naturally accompany anything with moving parts and circuit boards, we all have grown reliant on these gadgets to save money, time, and mostly to save us the hassle of live chit-chat with a person. We’ve eliminated “face-to-face” time in shopping, banking, paying bills, sending mail, even in playing games. Are we similarly neglecting our “face-to-face” time with God? Sadly, the answer is all too often yes, even though we need the face-to-face time to become emotionally and spiritually whole in relationship with our creator.

How can we persevere through life’s struggles by ourselves? Paul reminds us that through all of life’s moments of suffering, we shall not lose hope, “because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (v. 5). It is out of this crucible of Holy Spirit-directed stiff-necked stick-to-itiveness that character is derived. The key is that we are not alone to face suffering. It is our relationship with God through the Holy Spirit that helps us to endure life’s sufferings.

Relationship with God begins with conversation — not just a nod in the hallway on the way to the water cooler, if you will. It’s not even really the chat

at the water cooler. Our conversations with God should not be limited to Sunday morning worship services or an obligatory rote prayer at the dinner table. Our conversations with God are meant to be the old-fashioned kind that would have us sitting on the front porch on a summer evening with a glass of lemonade. Such a conversation is intimate, personal, real.

Prayer is not a sort of pill you take in the morning to make your day feel better. We don’t ignore God during quiet and contented times, then send a frantic text message to God asking for help when times get trying. The faith walk of the Christian is strenuous and demanding, one that demands perseverance and stubbornness, one that at all times demands a relationship with God through constant conversations, constant chats. Chatting is about relationship, communion, interfacing with another and with God. This means prayer at home with the family around the breakfast table, prayer in our cars on the way to work, prayer in our small groups, prayer in the evening while watching television, prayer in the car on the way home from work, prayer in every step of our life. Now, when I say prayer, I’m not saying that each prayer we say needs to be a long, eloquent prayer as we read in some old books. The prayer I’m talking about is the short conversations, or chats, we would have with our best friend through the day — in this case, our best friend offers us a constant shoulder to cry on, a constant helping hand, a constant presence we can trust will be there to give us the strength to endure the struggle, trust to dance with us when we’re happy, and trust to be there when we feel alone. It’s trusting God, knowing that God loves us through Jesus Christ, and feeling the strength and peace that comes through the Holy Spirit that gives us the confidence to persevere in life.

So, go ahead and talk with God. God won’t put you on hold. God’s not screening calls, and you won’t be caught in a spam filter. No, God’s got plenty of time for a nice, long chat.

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