

Sermon on Romans 5, 1-11

by Rev. Dr. Ralph Weinbrenner
 in the opening service of the Reformation 500 Celebration
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 at the Pacific Theological College

Romans 5, 1-11 (NRSV)

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,² 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.³ And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,⁵ 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.

⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.⁷ Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.⁸ But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.⁹ Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God.¹⁰ For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.¹¹ But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, let me count it as a clear sign of divine providence that this portion from Paul's letter to the Romans is given to us this week as we gather here at the PTC to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. It leads us straight to the heart of Luther's spiritual experience and theological thinking. His dramatic struggle with the Roman Church at first concerning indulgences and penance, then quickly focussing on the question of authority within the Church – this dramatic struggle was complemented by a spiritual and theological struggle for certainty.

In Romans 5 the Apostle Paul argues that the message of Christ creates certainty: *we will be saved*. He speaks about certainty not only in regard of our past, not only telling us that our former sins have been forgiven, not only telling us that justified through Christ we can make a new start in living according to God's will from now on.

To be justified through Christ understood in this way would be like a cut of our debts granted by God. As if the score was put back to zero and we would start into a new run of the game. Our future would be open again. We would be better equipped so that we might have a better chance to succeed – but we might also fail in the end. Is this the

way we understand our Christian journey? Indeed, this was the way the Augustinian monk Martin Luther did understand.

Paul argues that things are different. He points out that Christ is not only our second chance. Christ is our salvation. Christ means certainty - not only regarding our past but also regarding our future. In Christ, God has given everything to those who deserve nothing. Doing this he has created a new relationship to them which makes them valuable and dear – in Paul’s words: justified and reconciled. How could he ever abandon them? How could he condemn them in his final judgement, how deliver them to his wrath?

The one who spoiled his best robe in order to pull you out of the mud, the one who cleansed you and gave you new things to wear – he surely will offer you a seat at his table. Salvation is not a matter of merit, but a matter of relationship. The Roman Catholic tradition has always emphasized the community aspect of this new relationship: As we belong to God’s people we are on a certain way to salvation. Luther highlighted the immediate character of this relationship: Christ and Christ alone is our certainty that we belong to God’s people.

Salvation is a matter of relationship. That sounds pretty Pacific, doesn’t it? However, this new relationship created by God is not based on reciprocity, it is not about the balance of give and take, which would be the proper Pacific way – correct me if I’m wrong! - There is a clear direction: God gives and we receive. There is nothing we could offer in response. This is not only beyond Pacific cultural practice this is beyond all human measures.

As Luther stated in one of his early disputations, the love of God shown in the cross of Christ does not find anything in us to be loved. It actually creates what is loved. This love takes away our sinfulness and declares us to be righteous people and beloved friends without any reason to do so. Like in the beginning of the world, God creates in us a new person out of nothing. God does not need another reason apart from his creative love to grant us salvation. And this love will not act in vain. That is Paul’s point and Luther’s delight.

The certainty of salvation is a matter of relationship. Paul therefore moves from the language of legal action which deals with law, judgement and justification, into a language of personal relationship when he talks about hostility, reconciliation and peace. *While we were enemies we were reconciled ...* In terms of hostility Paul himself might refer to his own history having been a persecutor of the Church. His turning to Christ – or better: his being turned to Christ was an act of reconciliation.

Luther wanted to live a life dedicated to the perfect love of God. As a monk he discovered more and more that he was not able to love God but actually hated him. The more he tried to obey, the more he became aware of his own shortcomings. He drowned in his sense of sinfulness. He was caught in the perception that Christ is our second chance. And he was afraid of God who threatened him with punishment and he hated God for this until he discovered Christ as his salvation. Then there was certainty.

We might ask ourselves: Have we ever been hostile towards God in the way Paul was or Luther was? But then we should also ask: have we ever taken God seriously in his commandments and in his wrath against sin as they did? Have we ever undertaken to love God with all our strength as they did? It might have led us on a similar path. It might have led us to Paul's teaching and Luther's insight that certainty can only be found in what God does and what God promises and not in what we do – not in our response.

So in Christ there is certainty in regard of past and future, but how do we live as Christians today? How do we act out our certainty? In our text the only activities ascribed to us believers are to stand and to boast. What a nice description of our Christian existence! What shall we do to live out our faith in the present life? We boast. *We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.*

However, to boast in the coming glory of God does not mean to take pride in ourselves. That would be the kind of boasting we are very familiar with even as Church people. We all know that there is a history of Christian arrogance, based on feelings of cultural superiority, on denominational pride or spiritual self righteousness, which has nothing to do with God's coming glory.

Boasting in God's coming glory is not about our personal or cultural achievements, our titles, our skills and insights, our influence and honour, our beauty, our popularity, or even our morality and our piety – exactly not! We take pride in being acknowledged, saved and honoured by God without any reason given from our side. Boasting in this particular sense is an expression of humility- and of a certainty which is not based on our own achievements but on what God did and what he promises.

Paul goes one step further on when he says that we also boast in our sufferings. Sharing in the glory of God is not yet our present reality. Yet it is there only in the way of anticipation. We are living in a reality that in many ways is far from the coming glory and seems to be much closer to the wrath of God.

Paul draws a line that leads from suffering to hope: *suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.* Does this not sound all too easy-going? Suffering does not in any case create endurance. It can simply break a

person. It may cast us into gloomy indifference. Or it can make us impatient and aggressive. It makes us ask: Why does this happen to me? Suffering, waiting, enduring, facing an adverse reality – rather than to create hope this all is more likely to undermine our certainty.

When a cyclone like Winston hits the country and we see the devastation - would we expect anybody to boast in this loss of property and prospect? All we can do as Christians is to show our hope by creating some hope in helping as much as possible. When life and livelihood are threatened in this world for instance by rising sea levels, what does our certainty that *we shall be saved* in God's coming kingdom mean? Should we boast? Not really. At best we can take it as an opportunity to act in neighbourly love and in taking care for God's creation. Do we do that? Have we done that?

When we look at ourselves, when we look at the real impact our faith has on our lives. Are we sure that God's grace does any work in us? Are we sure that we are the ones who should boast in anticipation of God's glory? Can we be certain?

When we look at the many different interpretations of the Christian truth, the still multiplying denominations with their contradicting convictions, can we be sure that there is only one Christ who waits for us at the end of times? What does this do to our certainty?

When we look at the history of violent conflicts between Christians, between Protestants and Roman Catholics, between the mainline Reformation Churches and the reformers on the wings, the numbers of Christians who have been persecuted and executed by other Christians, when we look at what Christians in the name of God have done to other people, not least to God's chosen people, the Jews - are we certain that there is anything to anticipate?

Are we sure? No, we are not sure. We are in desperate need of assurance. Where could it come from? Paul did not cut the line after reaching back to hope. He finally gives a reason, why we should know that hope will not be disappointed: *God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*

Will this reason be strong enough to create new certainty? Only if God's love in our hearts is more than a warm feeling, only if we do not rely on our passionate emotions which will easily wane.

When Paul speaks about the love of God then he points to what God did by sending his son into the world. It is what Christ did by going his way to the cross.

The contradicting realities, the suffering, the violence, the neglect, the ignorance, the unbelief of people, the abuse of religious faith, the abuse of power - they are all mirrored in the cross of Christ. Love is not just a feeling it is a work God has done. The Spirit makes us acknowledge this work as a fact.

I don't know how loudly our boasting should be heard. Two thousand years of history, five hundred years of Reformation history might make a difference in this. Looking at our lives, looking at our world, looking at our history we only can lose all certainty. There is no way but to run back to the source of all certainty: God's creative love. Whatever our emotional, spiritual, voluntary or intellectual response will look like, not our response, God's work in Christ is the reliable thing to build our hope upon.

It is said in the word of the Gospel. It is given in Bread and Wine. May the Spirit pour it into our hearts.

Amen.