



## **“Stand on the Promises”**

Preaching Text: Romans 5:1-5

26 May 2013

Trinity/1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

FUMC, Arlington, Texas

Trinity Sunday is a day that we try to understand Trinitarian theology as a way we come to grips with the mystery of God. As St. Augustine once wrote: “A God without mystery is not God.” A priest at Clonard Monastery in Belfast, in trying to help his congregation understand the Trinity said:

Jesus didn’t sit down with his disciples one day and say “Today I’m going to explain something very complicated, I’m going to try to explain it in the simplest language possible.” He didn’t say that nor did he do it. Instead what Jesus does is that he points to a few different things. And the first thing Jesus points to is the fact that “God speaks.’ God actually talks. And that’s what makes our tradition, Christianity, totally different to other religions. God speaks. Remember that great line from Christ—“He who has seen me has seen God the Father.”

Secondly, there is a Word spoken. Spoken by whom? Spoken by Jesus, of course. And listened to by those first disciples. So, there is a Word spoken. “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life,” said Jesus.

Finally the third thing that Christ points to is what’s known as the Holy Spirit. Or we sometimes call it the interpreter—the interpreter of the Word of God. So those three things, firstly, God speaks, secondly, there is a Word spoken, and finally, God gives us an interpreter which we call the Holy Spirit (from 30 May 2010 homily).

Hear now the epistle lesson for Trinity Sunday:

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 (Romans 5:1-5).

Romans 5:1-5 reveals that the Holy Spirit is the means by which God’s love is poured into our hearts to comfort and strengthen us in times of hopelessness and trial. Paul writes: “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1). We have peace with God. I wonder if Paul means that we were at war with God. Could this be why Paul tells his readers,



“Therefore, since we are justified . . . we have peace”? What does it mean to be at war with God? Perhaps these questions do not occur to many people in today’s modern world. But maybe they should. To be at war with God describes the struggle deep within people to find meaning and value in life.

When we consider the many ways that modern people avoid intimacy with others or try to relieve the anxiety in their lives by misuse of sexual relationships, alcohol, drugs, or inappropriate attachments to work, we begin to see how war with God occurs. Paul, although he wrote this nearly two thousand years ago, speaks to us today about our need for peace with God.

Our lectionary epistle text culminates the opening section of Romans. It marks a transition from Paul’s discussion of the importance of Abraham to the Christian faith, and then shifts into Paul’s elaboration on a believer’s life in Christ. This passage helps us understand the basis for peace with God. As sinners, elsewhere described as “ungodly,” we are at war with God. Most people want to live in love and charity with their neighbors. When we are at cross-purposes in our relationships, it bothers us. How many times have we had a falling-out with someone because of something relatively minor that occurred? Because of our pride—and also because of the other’s pride—reconciliation is usually hard fought. Most of the time, we simply accumulate enemies because we do not know how to initiate peace through reconciliation and forgiveness.

Perhaps the same is true of our relationship with God. We want to live in harmony and peace with God, but somehow we have an uneasy feeling that all is not well in our relationship with God. Even so, Paul clarifies how reconciliation is possible between God and God’s creatures in this passage. I want to note two of many important lessons the Romans text teaches us. The first is reasonably simple. Paul wants the readers to understand that God initiates our peace with God even before we supply anything to the relationship.



So what do I mean by this? Let me illustrate. Some time ago, I noticed our neighbor, Todd Forest (not his real name), out raking leaves in his front yard. He was busy filling five or six strategically located trash bags. Then I noticed his four-year-old son, Reagan, clutching a handful of leaves. The four-year-old dutifully helped his dad by putting a small fistful of leaves into a bag. Reagan did this several times. Do you think, in the big picture, Reagan was helpful? No, but Reagan thought he was and, for his father, that was enough. It was not Reagan's effort but his father's love that made his work meaningful. The good news is that our peace with God does not require us to initiate the terms of peace; God has already done this for us! Remember when Paul wrote, "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. . . . But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6, 8).

The second important aspect of this passage is that there is a "circular effect" in what Paul writes. Paul starts with the hope in God and continues through suffering—endurance—character—and back to hope. Just as with peace, hope begins in God and ends in God. We may go through many ages and stages, but all along our way, for believers, there is always hope.

My friend Tom Butts tells a story that helps us understand the divine gift of hope. One of the most admired, and often feared, persons in twentieth-century public life was the indomitable Winston Churchill. Perhaps the most notable of all Churchill's characteristics was his refusal to surrender during the most adverse situations. In June 1965, only a few months before his death, he gave the commencement address at an English university. He was so unwell that he needed help to the podium. Once there, Churchill stood in silence for a long time. Then the voice that had once called Britain back from the edge of despair sounded publicly for the last time. Churchill said, "Never give up! Never give up! Never give up!" and sat down. There was a long silence, and then the listeners rose to their feet and applauded.



Pundits had pronounced Churchill's political career dead on several occasions, but he never gave up and he always came back. People saw evidence of his spirit at his funeral, celebrated at St. Paul's Cathedral. Churchill had carefully planned his funeral to the final detail.

There were some of the great hymns and, of course, the splendid liturgy of the Anglican Church. But there were two things Churchill planned that made his funeral service as unforgettable as his life. When the priest pronounced the benediction, there was a long silence. Then a bugler, high in the dome of St. Paul's, sounded the familiar notes of "Taps," the military signal of day's end.

After another silence, another bugler in the dome played "Reveille," a signal of a new day. It was quintessential Churchill (Tom Butts, "People of the Second Bugle," Monroeville, Al, FUMC, March 31, 2005).

"But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). We are the people of the second bugle, for where there is God there is hope—even for us! Especially for us!

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