

Sermon for Trinity, Buffalo
March 15, 2020
Romans 5:1-11

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A 3 Lent

As I was mulling over today's scripture lessons, this sentence really jumped out at me: "*For if we were reconciled to God by Christ's death while we were God's enemies, how much more certain that we who have been reconciled will be saved by Christ's life!*"

It got me thinking about how we are saved by *both* Jesus' death and his life, but how they are two different kinds of salvation.

When I look at the crucified Jesus, I know truly that God will not let anything in life or death separate us from [God]self. After all, God is the one being in the universe who *could* have avoided death—and yet, chose not to. *Why not?* I think it was for our sake, because somehow commandments on stone and the prophetic words of scripture were not enough to draw us to God, to convince us we could *trust* God, to transform us. By taking on mortal form, by taking on death itself, we can see that God knows our hopes and fears "from the inside out", as you might say, having experienced them in Jesus. We can see that God does not ask us to face anything God hasn't also faced through the Incarnation; God is not sitting happy and unscathed in heaven while we are slogging along suffering down here. God has faced it all... and as Paul pointed out, Jesus died for us knowing full well that we are sinners.

All those are things I receive from knowledge of the sacrificial death of Jesus.

But we receive gifts from his *life*, as well. Looking at Jesus' life and teaching, we see our model and example—our guide. We see *how* we are to live. And what do we see?

We see a man who called a community of diverse people around himself, and loved them, and taught them to love one another.

We see a man who reached out to the untouchable, and the outcast.

We see a man who forgave sins.

We see a man who steadily worked for healing.

We see a man of holiness and courage, who spent himself for others and for God.

We see a man of prayer, who put God's will above his own, even when that came at great cost to himself.

Life works better—the *world* is better off—when we live according to Jesus’ example. The gifts of his death and his life are both essential.

The life of discipleship has two aspects: *salvation* and *sanctification*. We are *saved* when we accept that sacrifice the Lord made on the cross on our behalf—and then we spend the rest of our life working at *sanctification*, trying to become a worthy servant of the Lord. It is not that we *earn* salvation by becoming sanctified! Sanctification is our grateful *response* to the gift of salvation, not a prerequisite of it. It is easy to get this confused.

I was raised in the Church, and my first understanding of God was that God is our creator and our judge. In my head that translated to “God loves good boys and girls”—so I worked real hard to be good. And being a pretty obedient kid, I thought I was doing okay with that.

Then our pastor had a heart attack, and we had a supply preacher for some time while he recovered. This man was a great preacher—or maybe his way of preaching was just a great fit for 12-year-old me—and he helped me understand some things I hadn’t understood previously. One thing I learned from him was that God knew my every thought, my every action.

Up until then, I had assumed God heard my prayers but wasn’t paying attention to me at other times. I thought saying “Dear God” was like picking up the phone to heaven, and saying “Amen” was like hanging up. You can decide what you want to pray, you can present your best self in a contained form like that, but the thought that God heard and knew *everything* in my head was like finding out someone had been sitting quietly in the corner of my home, watching me. Disconcerting, to say the least!

The guest preacher challenged us all to try to be perfect for one week. I had thought if I really tried, I could do it... except now I knew that God was sitting right up there *in* my head, paying attention. I started hearing my own inner thoughts in a new way. For example, I’d “overhear” myself thinking something angry or mean about my brothers, and then remember that God had heard that thought. I’d think, “I’m sorry, God, I didn’t mean it—well, I *did* mean it, but I am *sorry* I meant it—I am sorry if it makes you upset with me—!”

I was falling all over myself, mentally. I finally realized that no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t make myself be perfect—couldn’t make myself be *always* loving, *always* forgiving, and *always* merciful. I finally came face to face with the fact that I *am* a sinner. I finally realized that I *needed* a savior.

It’s lucky for me that the guest preacher went on to teach about grace! For the first time I came to understand what grace means: that even though I *am* a sinner, God loves me anyway, and wants me to be part of the party—and had already gone to great trouble to save me a seat at the table. All I needed to do was to accept the invitation—that is salvation.

And *then* came the part about learning what God wants me to be and do, and learning how to accept God's help to be and do that. He preached about love—that it is an action, not just a warm feeling. And he delivered a series of sermons about the disciples, and it was the first I realized that they were *real* people, not “plaster saints”. They got into arguments, and they didn't always understand what Jesus meant or what he was about. This one had been hot-headed, and that one was cynical, and that other one was a bit ambitious, and so forth.

That was an important lesson because after figuring out that I really *was* a sinner, I didn't think the church really meant it when it called *me* to be a disciple. I thought disciples had to be perfect people, with perfect understanding. But listening to the guest preacher made me realize that, imperfect as I am—sinner that I am—God could use me, too. Having accepted that gift of salvation by grace, now my job was to become the best servant I knew how to be—and I could look to Jesus for a model and guide. That's when I set about the lifelong process of sanctification: learning to be God's holy, prayerful servant. And that *will* take a lifetime.

So... it seems to me that knowing that Jesus died for us, and having accepted the gift of salvation, we are called to live in *hope*; and we are called to live with *purpose*, as Jesus lived with us. It is Jesus' *death* that reconciled us to God and saved us; it is his *life* that sanctifies us, and allows us to become channels for God's Spirit to work in the world, when we follow the way he set forth.

As I look at the world and the things that are tearing us apart, I know the world could only be helped by having more people leading holy, loving, serving lives.