

“Where Hope Come From”

Psalm 98; Romans 5:1-5

November 13, 2022

One time, when one of our kids was really little, we decided to take them to the Toys ‘R’ Us. Does anyone remember those stores? Seems like they were around all my life then, poof, right when the kids were little, they were gone. But thankfully for a few years there, Toys ‘r’ Us existed and my kids were able to go. Many a happy hour were spent inside their doors. But one time, when one of our kids was a toddler, we took them to the Toys R Us expecting one of those magical days at the toy store to appear. Well, magical? Not so much. Because do you remember how long those aisles were in the old Toys R Us? They were like 40 yards long with a break in the middle, remember? Well, we were coming down one aisle and there, just at hand-grabbing level, was a giant box of hand-sized bouncy balls. Again, when I saw them, I didn’t panic or anything but I should have because as soon as my child saw them, they were drawn to that box like a bug to a blue light. That child dug their little hands into that box of bouncy balls and flung one hard the length of the aisle. “ZING”. Now, we’re responsible people and the first thought I had was of some elderly woman at the store to buy a present for a grandchild tripping on one of those bouncy balls my kid just threw. So off I go running after it. Natalie, wisely, stayed behind but while she was reacting, two more little hands went into the box emerging with two bouncy balls this time. The child threw them in opposite directions. ZING, ZING. Now, three of these bouncy balls are going down the aisles at Toys R Us. Needless to say, we’re embarrassed and tired, chasing those balls down was a big ordeal.

I recall that mini trauma from several years back because life can be just like that. All can be smooth sailing and then, whoosh, a ball gets flung in your life. And maybe it’s not a ball so much as it is a difficult medical diagnosis or a pink slip at work or a child that’s struggling. We can all look back to difficult times in our lives and remember with such great clarity how hard things got for a period of time. Truth be told, we don’t like those times terribly much, not nearly as much as those times when everything is smooth sailing. But, as we know, the smooth sailing time life offers us is precious and, oftentimes, terribly short. More often is it the case that we’re navigating some difficulty or series of difficulties at any time. And that can be exhausting but what’s interesting is that in our reading from Romans this morning, Paul, we are to rejoice in our sufferings. Now, I don’t know about you, but I wasn’t rejoicing that morning’s minor suffering at the Toys R Us, nor do I have the greatest track record of rejoicing when difficulty arrives but that’s exactly what Paul counsels. So, what can get us there? What can fuel the fire for us to handle adversity like champs, even to the point where we are able to rejoice in our sufferings? Well, to begin with, it takes a proper understanding of God and of yourself.

In Romans 5, Paul begins by sharing the great good news – we have been justified by faith. What does he mean by that? Simply put, to be justified is to be declared righteous, not guilty. It’s a legal term really and one that is the opposite of guilty. The Christian gospel is that despite being sinners, we are declared righteous by God in and through Jesus Christ. And the means by which that happens is faith. Now, lest you think that then becomes a work for you to do remember Paul in Ephesians tells us that faith itself is a gift of God, so that “*no one will boast.*”

John Piper – “What happens to make a person a Christian - a child of God? First, the gospel is made known to him - the historical fact that God sent his Son into the world to die for sinners and to rise from the dead triumphant over death and hell for all who believe in Him. The Holy Spirit opens the heart to see in this gospel that Christ is trustworthy and more to be desired than all human treasures. And so, the heart trusts in Christ for all that God promises to be for us in Him. When that faith happens, we are justified before God. In other words, by that faith the Spirit of God unites us to Christ so that His death becomes our death, and His life becomes our life. God laid on Him the iniquities that we performed, and God laid on us the righteousness that he performed. He takes our sin, though He didn’t perform it. And we take His righteousness, though we didn’t perform it. And so, by the faith that unites us to Christ we stand before God forgiven for all our sins and righteous with the imputed righteousness of Christ.” That’s the Good News! And with that faith which is itself the gift of God, we find the most glorious thing of all – peace with God.

I had a long talk with an old friend yesterday. His father had just passed away. He wanted me to know because through the years, this man had become very dear in my life, kind of like a godfather, really in a lot of regards. When I was at Myers Park Presbyterian, this man would come over and visit when he stopped by his

church, Myers Park Methodist. We shared a faith in the Lord and it was a beautiful thing. So, my friend is hurting. His Dad was probably one of his closest friends right up until he passed away. But as we were talking, my friend began describing this amazing peace he was having. It came as the result of him knowing exactly where his father was not that he's passed. "There's a real peace that comes when you know Dad loved the Lord." That's peace, that's a peace that Paul is talking about here in Romans. It's a peace he calls one that "passes all understanding" in Philippians.

So, we are justified by our faith in God and thus we are at peace with God. But what disturbs it? What causes us that vexation of our souls that leaves us awake at night? Two things really. The first is our not believing in our justification in the first place. We are saved by grace and by grace alone but somehow, in our brokenness, we still find a way to make our salvation about what we're doing as opposed to what's already been done for us. It reminds me of a story we tell during our Kairos walks. It's called the Rooster story and goes something like this... Jacob, an East Texas farmer, raised prize-winning Bantam roosters, and his favorite rooster won blue ribbons at livestock shows and the State Fair. Jacob had one son, Liam, whom he loved very much. On Liam's 16th birthday, Jacob gave him a car and the son was overwhelmed with his father's generosity. Liam wanted to drive it to town to show his friends, and Jacob agreed. It was a small country town, so Liam gave rides to friends and others. As the sun was setting, Liam said goodbye to his companions and headed down the dirt road for home. He was late and he drove too fast. Soon Liam drove through the family farm's front gate, hit the brakes hard, and skidded into the front yard, striking his dad's prize Bantam rooster. The car had rooster blood and feathers all over the front grill. Liam saw his father quietly rocking on the front porch. Jacob saw the whole thing. Liam was cut to the heart that he had grieved and disappointed his father. He carefully carried the dead rooster up to where Jacob was sitting. With tears, Liam begged for his father's forgiveness. Jacob spoke softly, told the boy he was deeply saddened, but he forgave him and smiled. Jacob gently told his son, "Go bury the rooster." The son got a shovel, buried the rooster under the pin oak tree, and regretted his foolish actions. Four days later, driving home from school, Liam thought more about his reckless accident. When he got home, he took the shovel and dug up the rooster. Shaking off dirt and bugs, he carried the rooster to where his dad was working. Liam held up the rotting bird, and in great pain asked his father to forgive him. Jacob with great love and patience said, "Son, I already forgave you. Go bury the rooster." Driving home on Saturday, Liam thought more about his carelessness. Once home, he went to the shed, got the shovel, and headed for the pin oak tree.

By now we are thinking: if that boy digs up the rooster again, he's really dense. But what a minute. How many times do we "dig up our roosters," our unintentional and deliberate sins? How often do we remember the very sins which God tells us he'll remember no more? How often do we dig up our roosters as a means to beat ourselves up for something that's already been forgiven in Christ by our Almighty God? This is one of the ways we mess with our peace. We continue to berate ourselves for things in our past. Assuming we've repented of our sins, they're dead and can no longer harm us. Let them go. Bury the rooster and then Lose the shovel.

Another thing which can waylay our sense of peace with God is when difficulty comes into our lives. It's so easy at that point to go into a tunnel vision mode where we barely think of the blessings in our lives and instead focus unhealthily on the presenting problem, so to speak. But what Paul tells us here in Romans is that we're to "rejoice" even in sufferings. That's a difficult thing to wrap our heads around, isn't it? That we are to rejoice even in our sufferings. But lest you think this was just a slip of the pen and that Paul doesn't really mean it, hear some of the other things Scripture says – **Philippians 4:4**: "*Rejoice in the Lord always, I say again, rejoice.*" **1 Peter 4:13**: "*But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.*" **2 Corinthians 12:10**: "*For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*" **Romans 12:12**: "*Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.*"

So, this finding peace with God in suffering is difficult unless we remember what Paul teaches us here in Romans. That suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope. That's been my experience as a Christian and a Christian pastor. It has been my privilege to notice that oftentimes it is the very lives that were tested the hardest have the strongest, almost unbreakable, characters. I'll never forget one woman, named Mary. I visited here while I was at River Hills Community Church. Mary had lived a difficult life at times. She'd lost one son to carbon monoxide poisoning while a toddler, another

child was thrown from a car in an accident and struggled with that brain injury all of their life. This woman, Mary, had been put through life's ringer at points and yet she was always one of my favorite visits. Cheerful, optimistic, kind, compassionate. She was, like I said, one of those people you visit who always leaves you feeling more joyful leaving than when you got there. Mary had suffered but Mary had peace with God? Why? She had faith in Jesus Christ. She knew that while she was yet a sinner, Christ died for her and that in His redemption there was life abundant and life everlasting.

This passage from Romans has such amazingly great news embedded in it. We have a god that loves us enough in and through Jesus Christ to justify us from our sin. That grace came at a cost as God's own son hung on a cross for six long hours dying so that we might live. That is news worthy of rejoicing over even on the darkest of days. Because we know life can sometimes be like a maniacal child in a Toys R Us flinging bouncy balls down the aisles of our lives at any time. But that through it all, we're called to rejoice and to share the Good News of the Gospel. God's love has been poured directly into our hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are called to be the messengers of peace having found peace with God ourselves.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.