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Sermon: Radical
Text: Romans 5:1-8
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Romans 5:1-8

⁵ Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we^[a] have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have obtained access^[b] to this grace in which we stand, and we^[c] boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³ And not only that, but we^[d] also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, 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.

Pardon me, but I don't think any of us take Paul seriously. And part of it is my fault, our fault, the lectionary's fault, and the preaching schedules fault. We prioritize Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and treat Paul's letters as fill-in or extra we can add here or there, but we dismiss them as too abstract, too focused on minutiae, too emblematic of the patriarchal context of the first century and therefore out of step with the modern teachings on the roles of women, on gender identity, and sexual ethics. Why spend time trying to figure out Paul, comprehend Paul, digest Paul, and give Paul a hearing when we can hear the story of the feeding of the five thousand or the parable of the good Samaritan or the resurrection appearances of Jesus. Paul doesn't tell any stories about Jesus at all. Rather, he declares, he exhorts, he lectures, he admonishes, he berates, he tries to persuade. He is not the guy to have at your Thanksgiving dinner table when you are trying to keep the peace, have some entertainment, or keep things light.

Nevermind that Paul's letters are some of the earliest accounts of life together in Christian community, written one or more generations before we had any gospels or comprehensive accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. For the first decades of Christian community, all we had was Paul. His letters are the earliest sources we have in the New Testament. Episcopal priest and scholar Fleming Rutledge reminds us that in most congregations today, 'sermons are largely based on passes from the Gospels, less frequently from the Old Testament, and rarely from

Paul's Epistles.' She references the 'old suspicion that Paul took the simple teachings of Jesus and complicated them with doctrinaire intellectualizing [that] is still with us. This misunderstanding should be corrected.' She reiterates that Paul's letters are the earliest New Testament writings and there is nothing in them in direct conflict with the gospels. Rutledge acknowledges Paul's underdeveloped teaching on sexual relations and his alleged misogyny and his views on women, but she points out passages that are also from Paul in which he elevates the role of women and commends their gifts for gospel ministry. Perhaps most important, Rutledge lifts up Paul's letters, his letter to Romans in particular, as 'an incomparable source of faith in times of radical doubt,' without whom 'we would never [know] the full dimensions of God's project to reclaim the cosmos and everything in it' for God's sake.¹

But here in chapter five of Romans, v. 6, I have another problem with Paul. Before we try to deal with it, listen to the problematic verse again: 'for while we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly.' Most of us spend our whole lives trying not to be 'ungodly.' In fact, I would wager that most of us would prefer to chase a carrot or get partial credit than to be labelled ungodly. What does the Pharisee pray on his way to temple: 'God I thank you that I am not like all the [ungodly] people...thieves, rogues, adulterers, tax collectors...I fast twice a week, I give a tenth of all my income,' I am godly, I am justified before you, I am a good person.² Isn't that the whole reason we are here. To be godlier than thou, to attain righteousness, purity, to be more just, to try to be real Christians and not fake Christians, to improve our standing before God, to become holy, godly, and superior than the rest of humanity and certainly better than the ungodly. But here comes Paul telling us that Christ died not die for the just, the superior, the best of humanity, but that while we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. We like to chase carrots. We like to show how much improvement we are making. We like to produce outcomes and results. We like to prove our Christianity. Look how good my relationship is with God. Look how much good I am doing in the world. Look at the right causes I am supporting. Look at how much I pray. Look at how many hours I spend working on my sermon. Look at how many stripes I have in my robe. Surely this is enough to make me godly, prove my Christian legitimacy, justify my worth. And in response, all Paul can say back is 'while we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly.' 'Christ died for the

¹ Fleming Rutledge, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: Sermons from Paul's Letter to the Romans*, 3-4.

² Luke 18:12-13

ungodly.’ In his own paraphrase of this passage, preacher and teacher Will Willimon reminds us that ‘while were hostile, unglodly, chaotic, and rebellious, Christ died for us, rose for us, appears to us, and [comes to us.] God didn’t wait for us to get our act together.’³

God doesn’t wait for us to get our act together. In Jesus Christ, Paul tells us, we are put right with God before any godly thought ever entered our head, we are put right with God before we ever committed our first virtuous act, we are put right with God before we ever put our faith into action. There is a joke that I am going to modify and then tell in this space. And it is about heaven. In the middle of the beauty and majesty of the heavenly realm, God builds a 10-foot tall fence around a big section and puts all the members of the, let’s just call it the ‘self-righteous, we got here by ourselves and our own efforts toward justice and proving we are the true Christians’ congregation.’ Hopefully, I described this group of people in ways that could apply to more than one kind of church or Christian, including all of us. Anyway, this group of Christians begin to realize that everyone in their section of heaven has the same worldview, theological prejudices, beliefs about who the real Christians are, and on top of all that, they are all a little bit worried about why there is a 10-foot fence right in the middle of the heavenly vastness of God’s eternal realm. So one of them notes their satisfaction of heaven with all the other right believing, right living, right acting, and godly upstanding people, but then summons of the courage to ask God about the 10-foot tall fence. Why would an all loving, boundary breaking, welcoming God put up a big divisive fence right in the center of heaven. ‘Oh,’ God responds, ‘I just put that up for you. So you wouldn’t get upset about all the ungodly people that I let in here too. Or to quote the apostle Paul: ‘Christ died for the ungodly.’⁴

I am generally not in favor of proof-texting and putting up single verses that we throw in people’s faces and theologically try to impose upon them. However, if I were going to put one up on the bumper stickers, coffee mugs, billboards, and tattoos, this might be it. Christ died for the ungodly. And note it doesn’t say Christ died for the godly, the mediocre, and oh by the way, Christ died for the ungodly too. No it seems to suggest that the only people in the whole wide world that Christ died for are the ungodly and that maybe it also suggests that of all the people in the whole wide world there are only the ungodly. Maybe we think the ungodly are the Christians who mangle Christ’s message and throw out churches who ordain women and believe Jesus spent all his time hating

³ William H. Willimon, *How Odd of God*, 114.

⁴ Romans 5:6

on gays. But in response, Paul's one line answer is this: Christ died for the ungodly. Or maybe we think the ungodly are the secularists who are mangling Christ's message to one of generic acceptance and believe all are welcome but don't really hold to any distinctives of Christian discipleship. Again, what does Paul have to say: 'Christ died for the ungodly.' Or maybe the ungodly are the indifferent, who don't know enough or care enough to believe much of anything and are happy to float through life none the wiser. And frustrating if not consistent, Paul does not deviate, but responds again: 'Christ died for the ungodly.'

So much of contemporary religion is fueled by fear. And if I may so bold to say that if your beliefs about God and your thoughts about yourself and whether you will ever measure up or be worthy or qualify as a Christian or be 'enough' in the presence of God are motivated mainly by fear or guilt, we are doing it wrong. Actually, if you think that having enough belief or enough godliness or enough goodness or enough support of certain causes or having the right spiritual temperature is what the gospel of Jesus Christ is about, also may be doing it wrong. It's not about what level of proficiency or goodness or godliness or righteousness we need to attain, but more about wrapping our lives around a Savior who would live for, die for, and come again for the ungodly. I am not saying fear and guilt should never come to visit or don't inevitably come to visit. I am declaring that those characteristics should not be elevated to or confused with the presence of God. In their book, *Being Presbyterian in the Bible Belt*, authors Ted Foote and Alex Thornburg put it this way: 'to worry constantly [about our worth before God] or getting into heaven or ending up in hell is to live a life either motivated by or preoccupied with guilt, guilt over wrongs we've done to ourselves and to those around us. Have I done the right things or believed the right things? These kinds of questions may haunt us, guilt over our failures and human feebleness may obsess us, because we worry that our failure in matters of morality may hinder [us]. Shame and despair are too easily the result of this kind of fear. And shame and fear hinder love more than anything else in the world. God's judgment becomes the overriding theme as we envision ourselves standing before the throne of heaven to be judged according to our deeds. [And] life becomes a kind of test during which any wrong move' gets you tossed or rejected.

Such guilt and despair are not relegated to any one form of Christianity, but can permeate them all, including our ours. Perhaps the fear and guilt can come from being ostracized for a differing moral position or from social pressure to conform to one prescriptive worldview. And the basis of life, the authors remind us, is not

about being motivated by guilt or fear, but about being free, free to become our best version of the ungodly humanity for whom Jesus Christ died. Did you hear that? That's right, you and me, but also those Southern Baptists who have been meeting in town this week, the secular liberals who think religion hinders civilization, the people of other backgrounds or faiths on the other side of the globe, are part of a whole multitude of ungodly humanity for whom Jesus Christ died. Paul radically paints us all with one broad brushstroke. Christ died for the ungodly. And that's all of us.

So the only thing we can do in response is try to become the best version of the ungodly human being that Jesus Christ was willing to come for, live for, die for, and free. May we not squander such radical love in the living of our days.