



## 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after the Pentecost, June 14, 2020 St. Alban's Richmond

ROMANS 5:1-8

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. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

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I don't know if you're experiencing this or not, but these days I am acutely aware of my shortcomings and my brokenness. This is related to the COVID 19 pandemic that has given me a lot of time on my own to get into trouble and to reflect. But it's also, of course, related to what's going on around race and race relations. I'm no stranger to these things in that I grew up in the American South and so felt and saw firsthand what racism is. But it's more than that these days. It's about listening anew as a white person to the accumulated pain and grievances that we're hearing from black, Indigenous and people of colour from around the world. I feel complicit in this enormous problem. And to be honest, like many white people I have spoken to about this, I feel a little paralyzed.

And so I have to tell you that I come to our passage from Paul's Letter to the Romans with a bit of a wound this morning. A wound, hoping, as Paul says, that the grace we stand will offer some salve for that wound but will also do more—that it will encourage us and show us a path ahead and a hope that will not disappoint us.

And so with these things in mind, let's dive in.

As always with Paul, it's important to remember who he is. If we accept his conversion story in Scripture, Paul is a person who experienced the most dramatic divine initiative imaginable quite literally in the middle of his broken life, a life dedicated to the violent persecution of those in marginalized Christian communities. We need to remember this as we turn to what he said to the Church at Rome, a Church that was right in the heart of an empire that was hostile to it. A Church that needed encouragement and hope in the face of darkness.

And what does Paul say to them and to us?

“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”

Part of what Paul is getting at here turns on a teeny, tiny word “eti” that is translated “still” and is repeated twice in this passage. That little word, the Greek word “eti” means a state of being that went on formerly, whereas now a different state of things exists or has begun to exist. “While we were still weak,” “While we were still sinners” Paul says that's when God through Jesus took initiative to seek us out and to love us with an unconditional and unshakeable love. The repetition of this word “eti” is important. For, you might say, Paul is emphasizing the very state he was in prior to his conversion and the very state perhaps you and I find ourselves in as we live with our difficult and flawed selves in response to the pandemic and as we discover our brokenness and our complicity in the light of the racism that both surrounds us and, yes, lives within us.

And so what Paul is saying to himself and to us is that the God we worship does not wait for us to get better, to be less broken, to shape up before God through the life and death of Jesus loves us and embraces us. No—instead it is “eti” while we are yet broken, while we are yet helpless to help ourselves, while we are yet paralyzed, that the relentless generosity of God comes to us and tells us that we have been made God's own.

And so I want to spend just a little time talking about the emotional effect of such a proclamation.

If you've been ever so sick that you could not do anything for yourself and someone did for you what you could not do—then you know what this feels like. If you've ever been cast out of a community or job or family or church and someone came to you, then you know what this feels like. If you've ever messed up so much that you thought there was no possible second chance, and someone gave you that second chance, then you know what this feels like. But what Paul is trying to tell us is that while all these things are amazing, all of them fall short of the love of God because the love of God extended to us through Jesus comes to us “eti” while we were completely and utterly undeserving of it, while we were completely removed from access to it.

And so this perhaps helps us a bit with the pain and paralysis some of us from our pandemic-weary or white-weary perspective are carrying right now. But, of course, this is not by a long shot the only thing we need to be hearing right now.

For the other part of the proclamation here has to do with another “eti,” another painful state of being that we believe the love of God in Christ Jesus reaches out to. And this is the state of being that has nothing to do with our shortcomings and brokenness. It has to do with the place that people have been confined to on account of persistent systemic injustices that, yes, exist here in Canada and also exist throughout this world of ours.

And so if I may build on Paul's words:

While they were yet suffering the effects of racism: while they were yet suspected of being up to no good while shopping, while they were yet wrongfully imprisoned, while they were yet receiving substandard healthcare, while they were yet suffering from the effects of residential schools, while they were yet gasping for breath under the knee of a policeman, while they were yet dealing with the lasting effects of internment, while they were yet fearful for their children on account of the colour of their skin, while they were yet living in poverty, while they were yet addicted and hopeless, while they were yet living under all those conditions, the unconditional, unshakeable love of God in Christ Jesus has come to them.

And this is the thing, isn't it? We as Christians believe that the unconditional, unshakeable love of God in Christ Jesus has come to all of us. To those in the world whose lives have been distorted by situations not of their own making and to those of us who have contributed either directly to this or who have been complicit in the act. God's unconditional and unshakeable love has been given to all of us. And now where do we go and what do we do?

If I may, as I read further in Romans, this is what I see that Paul says to us who are Christians.

If we let the fact of the unconditional and unshakeable love of God that we have been given in Christ Jesus really sink in, it has to go someplace. If we let it really sink in, it takes you and me to the place that it took Paul—into the very life of God, a life that is defined by self-giving love, a life that itself creates the hope that we stand in and the hope that the world needs.

And so, later in Romans, Paul says this: with the Spirit's help, the fact of God's unconditional and unshakeable love for us all can transform the way we look at the world and who we perceive to be our neighbour. And along with this, God's unconditional and unshakeable love can quicken our commitment and our actions as we turn our attention toward those neighbours.

And so God's self-giving love for us becomes the basis for our self-giving love for our neighbours. We rise up from our own paralysis or we stand up after being cast down because the hand of God extended to us in Christ Jesus forever invites us and urges us on into actions and into a future that only hope can create, that only hope can sustain.

Today as we continue to live in an in-between time, a time in which we continue to yearn for hope as we look at the future, know this: in Christ Jesus God has traveled into whatever darkness, whatever paralysis, whatever confusion, whatever oppression, whatever injustice we and others have known. God has traveled into all those places and conditions with generosity and purpose. God comes to raise us up to stand in a hope that will not disappoint or fail us. And with this hope, God comes to work with us to create the world anew.