

The Second Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
14 June 2020

Romans 5:1-8

A seminary professor used to ask us a funny question every time the word "Therefore" appeared in a Biblical text, as we see at the beginning of the passage today from Romans 5:1. He would look at us intently and ask, "What is the therefore, there for?" What is this connecting word doing in the text? The answer is rather simple. The word introduces an application for whatever topic was discussed right before. In a way, Paul is saying, "Since we have proven that A is true, therefore let me show you what A does for us in our lives."

Back in Chapter 3, verses 19-30, Paul introduces a topic he has written about in the letters to the Galatians and Ephesians: The idea that we are justified by faith alone apart from any works of the law. We have all sinned and fallen short of the mandates of the law, but God has declared us righteous and forgiven out of the abundance of his grace, not because we suddenly were able to obey the Law, but because of our faith in his son, Jesus Christ. Justification, or what we commonly call salvation, is a free gift we obtain through the work of Christ on the cross for all of us. Paul makes it clear that through faith in Jesus, the penalty for our sin has been paid, the gulf of separation between God and humanity has been bridged, and we have become members of God's family as forgiven and redeemed children.

"Therefore," Paul begins today, "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." My friends, we repeat these words so often that we no longer think about the radical nature of what Paul is saying. We have peace with God! What a phenomenally beautiful statement! Through Christ, humanity and God share a kiss of shalom. Enemies have reconciled. God has signed a peace treaty with us, and all the offenses that caused our separation from God have been forgiven forever.

God has done for us in his Son what we were completely unable to do for ourselves. In times past, we offered the flesh and blood of animals in search of forgiveness, but no offering was sufficient to cover the totality of our sins. And even when these sacrifices were sufficient, sooner or later we offended against God's law again, and we once again betrayed the God who loved and provided for us.

In our present day, many walk through life so preoccupied by their sin that they frantically try to appease an angry God through good works. We try so hard to impress God! We offer our symbolic sacrifices of good works at the altar of our fears, and we pray that these meager works may be sufficient to obtain God's forgiveness. If salvation is possible at all, we say to ourselves, we will get there by the quality of our charity, the intensity of our devotion, the sacrificial nature of our

repentance, and our multiple works of piety. We are so terrified of an angry God that even the great sacrifice of the cross is not sufficient for the forgiveness of our sins. We have come to believe that our sin is so incredibly unique and special that even Jesus himself can't atone for it! We have to help him somehow. Perhaps, we can bake one more pie for the shelter. We can say one more Anglican rosary. We can light one more candle or make one more pilgrimage. Certainly there is something we can do to aid in our own salvation! Certainly part of our salvation is up to us! Surely, we must come halfway and meet God somewhere in the middle!

Both groups of people, the ancient people offering sacrifices for sin, and the current people trying to save themselves through their acts of charity are doomed to a life of endless guilt and shame. We can understand the people of ancient times, since their lives took place before the cross of our Messiah. But the actions of the modern people bring me great sadness. How arrogant we are to believe that there is anything at all we could do to earn our salvation! How hopelessly lost in our thinking we are when we believe we can tip the scales in our favor. Trust me when I tell you that salvation is a free gift of grace or it is impossible at all. Either we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus, or we are doomed, destined for perdition, locked in our own hopeless attempts to get God's attention.

Let me paint a picture for you: Imagine a solitary man, standing on a small rock, in an insignificantly small town, in an infinitesimally small part of the world, in a minuscule planet, within a very small galaxy, in a dark corner of a universe that is ever expanding and growing, and which now has billions of galaxies. Now imagine that this microscopic spec of a human is jumping up and down on his rock, trying to get noticed by the creator of the entire universe. He jumps up and down, holding the completed lists of all the charity works he has done over a lifetime of good works. But, sadly, there are other humans jumping higher than himself. Other humans who have done more than him to get noticed. Smarter, more dedicated people than himself with encyclopedias filled with good works. He desperately looks to his left and his right and he cries out a bit louder than his neighbors, but the distance between him and his God is so large that he knows deep in his heart that he is doomed to perdition. And he spends his entire life caught between the two grinding wheels of fear of damnation and hope of salvation. We are that man, if we somehow believe we can earn our way into heaven.

But, let me paint a different picture. That man who has been trying so desperately to get God's attention, drops to his knees and acknowledges in tears that there is nothing whatsoever he can do to save himself. He begs God for forgiveness and places his entire life in God's loving hands. He turns to the cross of Christ and whispers in complete surrender, "You do it for me! I am sorry I ever thought I could do this without you! I commend my life to your loving care." Now imagine that suddenly this man realizes that the God who is far more immense than the entire universe was never as far from him as he ever thought. He has been within his world all along. He has been right next to his rock waiting to be invited in. He was holding the adoption papers since the man was born, waiting for the

opportunity to make him his beloved child through his Son, Jesus. And all of this is possible, not because of his jumping up and down, but because of his surrender. Not because of his works, but because of Christ's works. Not because he is perfect, but because he is perfectly loved.

This is Paul's point. Because we have been justified by faith, we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. Then, suddenly, being at peace with God and having this hope that even now we share in God's glory, gives us the ability to place our lives within their proper context. Our life belongs within the life of the universe. We are part of something greater than ourselves. We have incredible value to God, who loves us as a loving parent loves his or her children. We are precious in God's eyes, no longer trapped by our own dysfunction and loneliness, but free and loved children. No longer dying to get noticed, but fully alive in the one who noticed us before we ever did anything of value for God.

Knowing that we are this loved, we now accept 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." We endure because we know that God is ultimately in control, and there is nothing that can separate us from his love.

My friends, it is not our strengths but our weaknesses that are appealing to God. Paul says, "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly... God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." This is the greatest truth of our faith. Through Christ's death on the cross people with a past are given a future. Take a break today. Let God save you in his Son, because I can promise you, you'll never be able to do it yourself. May God continue to bless you, Amen!