

Romans 5:1-5

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable and pleasing to your, O Lord. Amen

The great theologian Karl Barth once said, "A good preacher carries the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other."

I find it, however, more and more difficult to watch the news or read the newspaper because pessimism rules the day. It is very hard to hear and I find myself asking, "Where can we find hope?" Chapter 5 of the Letter to the Romans is one of those places. But first a story...

Once upon a time there was a young girl about nine years old. She loved to walk outside at night and gaze up at the thousands of stars. One night she climbed a tree to get a closer look and found that she could actually reach out and grab hold of a treasured star. She looked at it with wonder and awe before quickly putting it in a box and hiding the gift away in her closet. She was fearful even to open the box for fear of wasting the light and its warmth. One day, the suspense was too much and she went to the closet to open the box and found to her chagrin that the box was empty except for a pile of ashes at the bottom. Confused about what had happened she went to her father carrying her box in hand. As tears flowed down her face, her father went to his closet and removed a similar box. He said, "I know exactly how you feel." Then he opened his box to reveal his pile of ashes. Together, father and daughter wept over what they had lost.

This story explains how at one time or another, we have all been both of these fictional characters. We have been young enough to dream but selfish enough to keep the dream secret. The older father lacked the brevity to teach. That is to teach in a way that shares his own failures in order to recall the human weakness he has. We are great teachers when we admit our personal struggles. But, I want to tell each of you today that the past does not have to define who you will be in the future. In fact, Christ calls you to hope for something different. Not a Pollyanna type of hope that is floating around out there somewhere, but hope that is more concrete, even foundational.

Hope that is foundational was found while preparing for this sermon. You see there is an important collection of writings that are exclusive to the Lutheran church. The writings by Martin Luther and others are in a collection called the Book of Concord. * (Have books) If you want to be a pastor in the ELCA, you will have to buy this book and take two classes in seminary. One is called Reformations and the other is called Lutheran Confessions. But this sermon will not quote those writings. You can have the collective sign of relief! (Whew!)

I do not over-emphasize when I say a lot of the Letter to the Romans written by St. Paul is quoted in the writings and teachings of Luther and other reformers.

We only have to talk about five verses here in chapter 5 to understand the ultimate teachings of the Lutheran church. "We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand." This is the treasure that Martin Luther shared with his contemporaries and to the leaders of the Catholic Church who at that time taught that no one can come to God apart from the saving actions of the church. Luther said, "No, We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Quoting Romans 5:1, "What if Luther would have boxed that teaching up and hid it away in his closet?"

Thank goodness he did not, and we cannot either. The Holy Spirit is at work in different ways with each of us. So if this teaching of God's grace is new to you, God bless you! You have received good news. You can not obtain merit, justification or righteousness on your own work apart from Jesus Christ. Go and live your life in a way that does not hide this assurance. Do not hide your faith away so that no one sees it, because it may not be there when you need it. Your faith may be a box of dust.

And... what if this teaching is not new to you? You may have known for a long time that Jesus Christ's work of sacrifice and resurrection has reconciled the world. Well, like the father in the story at the beginning who shows his box of past failures to his daughter, you too can show your weaknesses. Do not paint yourself to be the perfect Christian. Instead lower yourself to the title Paul gives himself in the introduction to the Epistle to the Romans. "Paul, a servant, of Jesus Christ called to be an apostle..." Paul states that he is a "doulos" of Christ, a slave, of the owner, Christ.

A slave to the good news means we can share with others our foible, and our sins. We can talk about what it means to me forgiven by God and then open our eyes to the beauty of the world God created. Then, at this point the Holy Spirit can help bring hope to those who suffer.

This true story tells us what can be done when we are given hope that does not disappoint us.

In 1980, a seven year old boy named Chris was being treated for leukemia. Everyday he dreamed of being a police officer. A U.S. customs agent named Tommy Austin befriended the youngster and promised him a ride in the police helicopter. When Chris' health worsened Austin contacted Ron Cox, an Arizona Department of Public Safety Officer, and they planned a day to lift young Chris' spirits. On April 29, 1980 Austin and a caring group of public safety personnel started Chris' day with a tour of the city in a department helicopter, which also flew him to headquarters. Three cruisers and a motorcycle officer greeted him before his meeting with other command staff. There Chris was sworn in as the first honorary public safety patrolman in state history. But the experience did not stop there. Cox contacted a uniform shop which agreed to custom tailor a police uniform for Chris. The owner

and two seamstresses worked through the night to finish it. The officers presented the official uniform to Chris on May 1 and arranged a motorcycle proficiency test so he could earn wings to pin on his uniform. Needless to say, Chris passed with flying colors on his battery powered motorcycle.

On May 2, Chris was back in the hospital. He asked to arrange the room so he could always see his uniform, his motorcycle helmet and his police hat. Public safety officer Frank Shankwitz presented Chris with his motorcycle wings that day. Chris accepted them with a smile that lit up the hospital room.

The following day, Chris passed away, but not before seeing his dream come true and experiencing hope, strength and joy that came from receiving his wish.

There is that word again. Hope. Let us remember today and each day that hope is the finished product of suffering. Suffering produces endurance because we know that Christ suffered for the world. There are many times in our lives when we suffer. You may be under such suffering today, but with God we are able to continue, indeed to endure. I am glad that you are here today as we endure what we suffer. For then a character begins to grow. 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.

Amen.