

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today in the Epistle reading from Romans, God's love is front and center. Along with this mention and the mention of the disciples in the Gospel I ask...what makes a disciple of Jesus Christ? What makes a Christian? In our judgments at times, we seem to know this...what makes a Christian? What qualifies us as a Christian or a disciple and is there certain moral criteria that certifies this for us? Someone may answer these questions by saying God's love, but our opinions and judgments of ourselves and others would say something different. I suppose we all have an opinion about what we feel we must do to qualify for God's love.

With these questions in mind, I want to begin this morning by looking back at last week's Gospel lesson. In that lesson we heard the call to Matthew to follow Jesus. Of course, without hesitation Matthew, as we hear in the text, follows. We may not pay it any mind because it's in the Bible and it's dealing with Jesus, so we figure Matthew is special because Jesus calls him. But what would our reaction be to Jesus calling a corrupt person within our culture today?

Just imagine Jesus calling someone who has extorted money from some senior-citizen...just imagine Jesus calling an immoral pastor or a dishonest tele-evangelist...what would you think if it were your most hated politician being called by Jesus...what would we think if Jesus were to call someone like that? Think of the person you dislike the most...do you think that Jesus would call them?

Our gut reaction to Jesus calling Matthew may be less than enthusiastic because of our complacency, nonetheless, Jesus calls Matthew. When we learn about Matthew, he would probably not be who we think Jesus would call because he would be judged as unworthy. Matthew was a tax collector which means he was also a social outcast and was despised by the culture of that time...and for good reason. After all, Matthew rejected all religious and political beliefs and principles, he extorted money from his own people and he was also a traitor who collaborated with the Roman Empire. Matthew wasn't even a man of faith he was a man openly conning the culture he existed in...and this is who Jesus calls.

But even knowing this, our views of the culture and our assumed views of the culture's opinion of the church has painted Christianity and culture as two opposing forces just like we see in Matthew and Jesus. And today, we the church say the culture out there is destroying the church. And then in our assumption we quickly jump to conclusions and say it's because of youth sporting events, or they've taken prayer out of schools or they removed the Ten Commandments from our governments' buildings. Ironically then, if the church despises the morality of our culture, why do we expect our culture to instill and teach our children about faith.

Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest, academic, and author who I have admired since seminary when I first learned about her has said:

“Jesus was not killed by atheism and anarchy. He was brought down by law and order allied with religion, which is always a deadly mix. Beware those who claim to know the mind of God and who are prepared to use force, if necessary, to make others conform.”¹

Nonetheless, we conclude...it's the culture's fault. But isn't our call as children of God, as Christians, as disciples of Jesus Christ...have we not been commanded to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves...or does this mean to love the neighbor who sits with us here in this place?

Our churches have become bomb shelters against the culture. We've circled our religious wagons to preserve the church's purity because we think we are being attacked by the anti-Christian culture. So, we sit safely in our self-righteousness under the illusion that we're safe in here from the sin out there and love God and neighbor in here instead of out there. We conclude then, that God loves us because we are doing all the correct things to make God love us. We complain about the culture, but *we are the culture*. What have we done to make God's love known in the world other than complain about the culture and the state of the church? So, while we sit safely in here, the culture moves to form churches that are simply mirrors of ourselves based on nothing but bad theology and bad history. But look again, Matthew was called from out there and not in here. Look around, sin exists in here just as much as it exists out there.

God's love and our faith in that love is *NOT* put into action in the exclusivity of the church, it is to be taken from in here and put into action out there where it is NOT known or experienced. We have plenty of God in here, we are told each week of the mercy and the forgiveness we receive in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, however, we need to take that mercy and forgiveness and give it away as freely as it has been given to us...and not just in our words of judgement, but in truth and in acts of mercy and care for others beside ourselves...and not just to those we think and assume are worthy of receiving it. This is how we are sent when we ourselves say amen to – Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Loving our neighbor does not specify who are neighbor is. Jesus just says love your neighbor, and if we have to ask who our neighbor is, then we are simply looking for an excuse to NOT love our neighbor.

In Jesus Christ, God proves His love for us in that while we were sinners...while we were sinners, St. Paul does not say, while we fool ourselves into believing we are righteous, rather, while we were sinners, Jesus Christ died for us. St. Paul tells us this very thing today, “Christ died for the ungodly.” God's love for us is given freely, we receive it without payment, we do not earn it nor does God's love depend on how righteous we think we are or how unworthy we judge others to be.

But who is the “ungodly” that St. Paul is writing about? I think in the fortress of our self-righteousness we would point to those out there because we know all about God in here. St. Augustine, one of the most important church fathers, and generally regarded as one of the most influential philosophers in the history of the Western world claims that as soon as you think you know God, as soon as you think you understand God, you don't understand. As soon as you think you know what to say about God, you are no longer talking about God. God's love, and our faith

¹ The Perfect Mirror (Jn 18:1-19:37) by Barbara Brown Taylor. This article appeared in the Christian Century, March 18-25, 1998, page 283; copyright by the Christian Century Foundation and used by permission. Current articles and subscription information can be found at www.christiancentury.org. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted & Winnie Brock.

in that love is known or justified independently of any of our assumptions beyond the experience necessary to fully understand God and God's love and mercy...beyond our faith in God, we can only experience what Jesus has revealed about God. And what we know is that Christ died for the ungodly because of God's love for us all. We do not earn God's love because we behave righteously or we loved a certain way, we simply have faith in the fact that God loves us and this is made know to us in Jesus Christ.

Martin Luther wrote in his Heidelberg Disputation in 1518 that the love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it.² What Luther is saying is that we love things that are pleasing to us, or things that act in pleasing way toward us, whereas, God's love for us does not depend on what or who we are...it creates love in us. It does not depend on our having moral superiority over others that make us lovable to God. We are loved even in the ugliness of our sin.³ Luther goes on to say in the disputation:

...the love of God which lives in man loves sinners, evil persons, fools, and weaklings in order to make them righteous, good, wise, and strong. Rather than seeking its own good, the love of God flows forth and bestows good. Therefore, sinners are attractive because they are loved; they are not loved because they are attractive.⁴

This more or less is what Matthew says as well in our appointed Gospel lesson today:

³⁶ When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (Matthew 9:36)

Today we experience God's love for us in this Holy Word that is before us, we experience God's love given to us in the bread and wine that is Jesus Christ in this Holy Meal, and we experience God's love being poured out in the Baptism of little Rowen Katherine. And in this Holy Baptism we see how God's love flows forth and bestows good because we know that to be baptized in God's name is to be baptized not by *human beings* but by God himself. Although it is performed by human hands, it is nevertheless truly God's own act.⁵

Today in our Epistle reading from St. Paul, he writes to the Romans so that they may see the hope in the love they have in God through Jesus Christ. Keep in mind that St. Paul did not establish the congregation there in Rome. It was founded by unknown Christians moved by the Holy Spirit. However, by the time St. Paul writes this letter to the Romans it appears that he has not even visited the church in Rome. Nonetheless, he doesn't know them, he does however, care about them and he wants them to simply have hope.⁶ We can see some of that in this morning's text. The Apostle speaks of peace and hope, right at the start of the passage. Listen again to what Pau has written:

² *Luther's Works Volume 42, Devotional Writings*. Edited by, Harold J. Grimm, General Editor, Helmut T. Lehmann. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957, the Heidelberg Disputation, section 28, page 57.

³ Working Preacher, Commentary on Romans 5:1-8, by Stephen Chester, Lord and Lady Coggan Professor of New Testament, Wycliffe College, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Not a direct quote but very much borrowed from this commentary.

⁴ *Ibid*, page 57 (*Luther's Works 42*)

⁵ Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), The Large Catechism, Fourth Part: Concerning Baptism, page 457 par 10.

⁶ This reference to the church in Rome and St. Paul is "borrowed" from, Pastor Gregory P. Fryer Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY Proper 6A/Lectinary 11A, preached on June 14, 2020 based on Romans 5:1-8, entitled: "Christ Died for the Ungodly"

¹Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have *peace with God* through our Lord Jesus Christ. ²Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice *in hope* of the glory of God. (Romans 5:1-2)

We experience the hope we have from God through this letter that is before us from St. Paul, we experience the hope we have in the Gospel that is before us from St. Matthew because we are at times like sheep without a shepherd, but we have compassion from God in these words from Matthew. We experience hope in the very meal that is set before us in the body and blood of Jesus Christ and we experience the hope in the waters of Baptism poured out upon little Rowan. And we rejoice in the hope of taking God's love out into the world through the new workers who have joined with us, Ben, Joanne, and David.

By the grace and mercy of God made known in Jesus Christ, we sinners are made attractive to God because we are loved by God; we are not loved because we have made ourselves righteously attractive to God...we are made attractive to God by the love given to us. So, what makes a Christian? What makes a disciple of Jesus Christ? Character and hope...character that comes from suffering and endurance and these produce hope. The hope that does not disappoint us, it is the same hope in God's love that has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit and has been given to all.

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