

Into the Abyss
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
May 17, 2015

Romans 5: 1-11

Whenever I preach on the apostle Paul, I get the feeling I'm doing the theological equivalent of taking my medicine, doing push-ups or eating my peas.

True confession... Paul's letters are not my go-to sections of the Bible. I'd prefer to play with gospel stories or even the Hebrew scriptures. He's a dense writer... and it's hard work to understand what he is saying and find meaning in his perspective.

But if I ignore Paul, I'm ignoring a good portion of the New Testament. That's convenient for me, but not faithful or necessarily helpful for you. And when I ignore Paul, I may be missing a message I need to hear. Now I may not always agree with him on the details, but I need the God that Paul is pointing us towards today.

I've been thinking most about that first verse this week: "*therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*" In chapters 1-4 of this letter, Paul makes the case to the church in Rome that they are justified by faith (through no work of their own). Justified means made right with God, in right relationship.

There are a couple of reasons that Paul writes to this church that he has never visited. The first is that, like the writer of the gospel of Matthew, Paul is trying to help Jews and Gentiles live together in community. He's trying to get the church to focus their energy on living a life of grace rather than worrying about who is following dietary laws and who's not, or who is circumcised and who is not. Paul invites his church, Jew and Gentile, to worry less about their differences, and more about trusting in God.

But another reason Paul writes to them is that he believes if he can get the church to trust in God, they might find the peace and hope that will help them get through their present suffering. His contention is that we're made right with God by faith, by trusting, by surrendering. Again and again, God pulls us back into right relationship, and we discover along the way that God has been waiting for us the whole time.

Paul believes that in Jesus Christ God has liberated the entire human race, even the whole cosmos, from the slavery of sin and the power of death. For Paul, God's love has been proven. Although we may now feel the suffering that produces endurance, our endurance through it will produce character, which will lead to hope, which will transform us all.

On the night of October 19, 1984, pilot Erik Vogel was uneasy about flying. It was snowing; his plane's de-icer and autopilot weren't working properly; his co-pilot had been bumped off the flight to fit one more passenger on the 10-seater plane. But the young pilot was behind schedule and he felt like his job was on the line, so he took off, as he did most days, shuttling between the remote communities that dot the Canadian wilderness.

His intuitions were confirmed when right after take-off; chunks of ice came off the props and banged like rocks against the fuselage. Under the circumstances, he never should have risked the flight. Then, dependent on his instruments, he made a calculation error. The pilot thought he had taken the plane over a ridge, but he didn't notice there was another rise of land behind the first, reaching 2,500 feet, and so he hit that top of that second rise.¹

The plane crashed through a bank of trees, and plowed into the ground, broken bits sheared off the roof like a sardine can. Tragically, six people died in the crash, but four survived: the pilot; a politician; a prisoner being transferred to a court date; and the police officer who was escorting him.

The police officer recalled becoming conscious and not quite realizing the plane had crashed. He woke up buried up to his chest in dirt, with no idea of what was going on. Suddenly, the prisoner he had been escorting appeared and began digging him out. The prisoner does the same for the surviving pilot and the politician, dragging them from a smoking plane to safety.

Next, the prisoner searched for anything to burn and start a fire with, which is no easy job in the dark, with three feet of snow and subzero weather. But he persevered, and built a fire with which to warm the others.

Now, the police officer had been a Canadian Mountie and recovered numerous bodies of people who froze to death in the wild and he assumed they would die. There was so much that he hadn't accomplished yet, and he tried to not slip into despair.

¹ <http://www.npr.org/2013/05/21/184177321/after-crashing-in-canadian-abyss-four-men-fight-to-survive>

In truth, without the quick thinking and fire making of the prisoner, he and the other survivors would have surely perished. With the fire burning on the side of the ridge, rescuers found them the following morning.

It turns out that each of the four survivors were, in their own way, transfigured by the crash and rescue. The pilot struggled with guilt through the years. His flying career stalled because after the crash no one would hire him. So he became a firefighter, and had the opportunity to save many more lives than those that were lost that day.

But the most dramatic change was for the prisoner. Here he was; a lifelong criminal with a long record, a homeless drifter who had been moving across the country since he was 15. Two days after the crash he finally faced a judge in court for sentencing of his most recent crimes. The judge, having heard the story of the accident, said to him, *'You are to be commended for your actions and I exonerate you of all charges.'* So this drifter who'd made so many bad choices and encountered so much hard luck was suddenly hailed as a hero, offered a job, given a second chance.

Their suffering produced endurance, their endurance produced character, their character led to hope... and it was the crisis which led them to the transformation that shook their complacency.

We often confront our limited nature in a crisis and come out with a deeper understanding on the other side. At least we do sometimes. Crisis tends to bring people together; there is an initial outpouring of compassion and support for the survivors, along with gratitude to be alive. Some people find themselves drastically changed, but most eventually return to everyday life.

The real story of the plane crash is not just how each person was changed, but how their shared experience gave them the strength and courage to go on and find new meaning. In fact, the four remain friends to this day, which tells us something about love-in-community, and how friendship and support can lead an individual towards healing.

You know, that's why twelve-step programs work so well, not because of the magic or brilliance of the steps alone, but because of the gathered community. Many people find hope in their pain and suffering by running in the Relay for Life to raise cancer research funds or working to transform gun violence in their community.

This is why we gather in church each week, and why we sing and pray and reflect on scripture together. We are not transformed by our wisdom alone, or our knowledge alone or the calming power of prayer and music. *If love is at the heart of things, can you really love by yourself?*

When people say they don't believe in organized religion, or that they are spiritual by not religious, I ask them "*Do you believe in community?*" Friends, you know that it is hard to have community without organization, and hard to make community without passing through some disagreements and annoyances.

What I really want to ask is a much deeper question, "*Where will you go, when walking alone in your spiritual journey is not enough?*" Even God does not dwell alone. The mystery of our one God, is that it is a communal in-dwelling together of three personas; Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit. Even love cannot live alone.

Too often we think that it's some big, bad sin that separates us from God, but it's really fear that separates: fear of failure, fear of disapproval or rejection from others, fear that others will discover that we are only human or judge us by our past mistakes.

The Apostle Paul tells us today that we can trust that we are *already* right with God. We can trust that we are *already* beloved children. We can trust that we are *already* worthy of love, and we can live with freedom and joy. Our worth is not dependent upon what we do or fail to do. Our worth is not dependent upon what people think of us or the good or bad that happens in our lives. Our worth depends on God, and we do not need to fear.

We can be ambivalent about the cosmic story Paul is telling and still believe we are held in God's love. How does trusting that we are loved unconditionally change our priorities? What happens to us when we are struggling and something deep within us tells us we are loved even then? How does trusting that we are loved unconditionally pull us back to the person God is calling us to be, to the church God is calling us to be? Can our trust in God's love calm the storms that swirl inside our hearts and minds, and give us hope in the future?

The Psalms say that faith like this can save us.

The Apostle Paul says that faith like this can save us.

Turning our troubles and brokenness and fear over to God who loves us without ceasing and beyond condition, no matter who we are or where we've been or what we've done or haven't done...that's what it means to be pulled out of the abyss. May it be so, friends, and may it be soon. Amen.