

“While We Were Yet Sinners”

March 15, 2020

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: Romans 5: 1-11

The first verse of our Scripture lesson this morning proclaims, “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” This is vital for us this morning. The fact that “We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” means, God is not out to get us. God is not declaring war on us. God is not attacking us. God is not sponsoring terrorist attacks on us. What I am trying to say is I do not believe the coronavirus is from God. I do not believe this is a punishment from God for the sinfulness of this world. Yes, we live in a sin filled world, but a lethal virus is not the God of the New Testament’s style. I do not believe this is God reminding us how weak we are compared to Him. We already know that. We get one or two stray cells that are not supposed to be in our bodies but find it a great place to live, and those cells multiply and take over. We call in cancer. We already know we are not invincible. I do not believe this is God’s way of testing our resolve – to see what we are willing to risk in order to continue gathering and worshipping God. Sure, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego risked their lives and stood defiant against the king who tried to control their worship and God saved them from the fiery furnace; but they were being asked to actively bow down and worship a golden idol and I don’t think this is what our health professionals are asking of us. I really don’t think this virus outbreak is a punishment from God, a power play from God or even a test from God. I think it is just another virus that mutated faster than our bodies’ defense systems. I believe that because verse 1 says “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”. Verse 10 even reminds us that while we were still enemies of God, God did not destroy us but reached out to us to bring peace.

Suffering is not a sign of God’s wrath or even God’s absence. Verse 3 of our reading assumes we will have suffering in our lives. It is simply a part of life. But verse 3 goes on to assure us that the suffering is not the end. Because we have peace with God, suffering does not get the last word. Because we have peace with God, we are connected with the very source of life. Because we have peace with God, life wins. Starting in verse 3 Paul says we have the opportunity to, “rejoice 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 which has been given to us.” In other words, even when we suffer, we don’t get fixated there, we don’t get stuck there, because we know it is not the end. God’s promise through Jesus Christ is not a worry free life, but eternal life. Even when our suffering leads to death, we can still rejoice because that worst thing is not the last thing. There is another world, an eternal world. It may not be made of flesh and bones, it may not be a physical place at all, but it will be a place in the presence of the God of life forever. That is the Good News on which we stand.

But how did we get there? How did we get to the Good News on which we stand? Mercy, pure mercy. Lois Palau shares a time when a mother once approached the legendary French General and Emperor Napoleon seeking a pardon for her son. The emperor replied that the young man

had committed a certain offense twice, and justice demanded death. “But I don’t ask for justice,” the mother explained. “I plead for mercy.” “But your son does not deserve mercy,” Napoleon replied. “Sir,” the woman cried, “it would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask for.” “Well, then,” the emperor said, “I will have mercy.” And he spared the woman’s son. Mercy is not what we deserve from God, it is what we need. As God’s beloved children, we can’t do anything to make peace between God and us. Like we talked about the last couple weeks, we have this power of sin and selfishness constantly pulling at us (our flesh, our desire for immediate increase in pleasure and decrease in pain) and it pulls us away from God and the power of the spirit. But “when we were still weak and powerless” to make things right with God says verse 6. “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (8) “When we were God’s enemies,” says verse 10, “we were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son.” God didn’t wait for God’s dearly beloved people to take even one faltering step toward God before reaching out to us. God didn’t wait for us to clean up one square inch of ourselves before moving to adopt us as God’s children. While we were yet sinners, God had mercy on us.

Mercy is what God does through Jesus. When you glance at what Jesus did, you can’t help but be struck by the overwhelming mercy by which He approached the people He met. I skimmed through the Gospel of Matthew to see what Jesus did. In the 4th chapter Jesus preaches His first sermon saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Jesus immediately followed it by showing mercy to the people. Verse 24 “they brought Him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them. Healing those who are sick and without hope is straight mercy. After calling His disciples and sharing the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus comes down and finds a man suffering from leprosy, and He reaches out and heals a man you were not even supposed to go near. Did the man do anything to deserve it? He simply believed Jesus could. That is faith leading to mercy. In that same chapter Jesus heals a Centurion’s servant, two demoniacs, Peter’s mother and a host of folks who come to her door. The next thing you know, Jesus is on His way to see about a man’s daughter who is very ill, but is stopped along the way by a woman who didn’t say a word, but just reached out and stole a healing. Yet Jesus stopped to help her, then proceeded to the man’s house and brought the man’s daughter back from the dead. Did they deserve it? No. Pure mercy. Jesus made the paralyzed walk, the blind to see and the deaf to hear. He feed 5,000 people then turned around and feed 4,000 more. Why? Because He had compassion for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd. That is mercy. A man came up to Jesus and kneeling before Him said, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; for often he falls into the fire, and often into the water.” Jesus had mercy, and healed the boy. In case you missed what Jesus was saying with his actions, in chapter 18 He tells a parable about a man who owed an incredibly huge debt, and was brought before the king who then forgave him the whole amount – an incredible act of mercy. But when that same man went out and demanded payment from someone who owed him money, and threw the man in jail when he could not pay – aka showed no mercy. Jesus let us know the king came back, found the one who had been forgiven so much and failed to forgive others, and threw him in jail. In case that was too subtle, one of the last teaching stories Jesus tells in Matthew is a judgement on the nations. Those who gave food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, and

visited the sick and imprisoned; they came into the Master' presence. Those who showed no mercy, did not. "For when you failed to do it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you failed to do it to me." Yes, there were times when Jesus did not necessarily respond in mercy. This was especially when dealing with the religious authorities of His day. They didn't think they needed mercy, so He helped them see that they did, so that they could receive it. Even dying on the cross was an act of mercy. He could have called down angel warriors. He could have showed dominating power, yet He showed mercy, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

The reality is, we have found a peace with God which allows us to rejoice through suffering because we know even if the suffering leads to death, God still gets the last word and that word is life. And that peace is brought about solely by God's mercy that gives us the confidence that this virus is not a punishment from God. With that said, God will find ways of using this virus for His glory, and a big part of that will be you and me. When we find safe ways to help our neighbors, God will be glorified. When the church acts like Christ's church even if we can't gather in worship every week – that will be our spiritual worship. When we show mercy at every level of our lives: in close personal relationships, in work and social relationships, with those who serve us in restaurants, stores, and home delivery, with complete strangers and even perceived enemies; then God will be seen through this virus. We show mercy, not because the people we meet always deserve it, for it would not be mercy if they deserved it. No, we let mercy lead us because mercy lead us to God and eternal life.

Mike Van Heyningen