

Therefore, 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; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast 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 that has been given to us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

One of the most memorable experiences during my recent trip to Germany as part of our synod's delegation was a conversation that happened in a church tower that's nearly a thousand years old. Some of you saw pictures last week of the adventure of ascending that tower! Near the end of our trip, we went up the bell tower of St. Nicholas Church – it's the oldest part of any building in all of Leipzig. Once we arrived at the top, our German hosts engaged us in conversation about the experiences we'd had so far – they wanted to know what we thought of Germany, and of the German church, and of the experiences we'd had during the trip. Martin Haenker, whose title in the German church, "superintendent," is equivalent to our "synod bishop," shared a story with us about something that had just happened that day to a colleague of his, and he wondered what we thought and whether we might have handled it differently in the United States.

This colleague, a church official, had been contacted by a journalist who'd asked him to summarize in one or two sentences: the Christian faith, and the events of the church festival that had just wrapped up – it's held every two years in Germany, and this year was especially exciting because it coincided with the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, and the meaning of the Reformation, and the church's message for the world today. All in just one or two sentences! The church official went back and forth a few times with the journalist, but the journalist stuck to there only being room for one or two sentences total on all of those topics. Martin's colleague said it was impossible to make any kind of accurate or meaningful statement in such a short space, and so ended up declining to comment at all.

Martin told us that while he understood his colleague's frustration with the request, he also felt that even if all you have is one or two sentences, if that's all the time you have for people to listen to what the church has to say, it's better to say something than nothing at all. We agreed that his colleague had been asked to do the impossible, and also that Martin was right to think we should take any opportunity to speak on behalf of the church. Now, our conversation up to this point had all been translated – Martin would speak a sentence or two in German, and then another of the hosts would translate it into English for us, and vice versa for when any of the Americans spoke. But then one of our group members said to Martin, in English, "Well, what would you have said? How would you summarize all of those things in one or two sentences?" And without missing a beat, without waiting for translation, Martin responded, in English, "God is love."

God is love. It's a good summary. And a good place to start. "God is love" – a summary of the Christian faith, and the intent of the Protestant Reformation, and the church festival, and the church's message for the world today. God is love. I think that's what the apostle Paul is saying in his letter to the Romans, though he's certainly not so succinct about it, and in fact he hasn't even mentioned the word "love" until chapter 5, in the verses we read today.

The first four chapters of Romans are about how through Christ's life, death, and resurrection, we are justified - put in right relationship - with God. But if that was all Paul wanted to say, this letter could have ended after four chapters. Instead, the letter stretches to 16 chapters! Chapter 5 begins with a very important word: "therefore." Here, in chapter 5, Paul gets to what a college English professor of mine called the "so what" part of any argument – what difference any of it makes. What difference does it make in life to be put in right relationship with God? "Therefore," says Paul, "since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Because of justification, we have peace, and we stand in grace, and we boast in our hope of sharing God's glory – the very presence of God among us and in the world, even in the midst of suffering.

Here it's helpful to remember to whom Paul first writes these words. Unlike the rest of his letters of which we are aware, Paul isn't writing to a person he knows, or to a congregation he's founded. Paul has never been to Rome, and while at the end of the letter he mentions some people by name, he doesn't really know the congregations he's writing to – whether there is one congregation or many, and he doesn't really even know who all will end up hearing his words. He addresses this letter not to a person or a congregation but "to all God's beloved in Rome, all who are called to be saints" (Romans 1:7).

He doesn't know them but he knows something of their situation. Several years before Paul wrote this letter, the Roman emperor had expelled all Jews from Rome, including Jewish Christians. And for only a year or two now they have been allowed to start returning home, under a different emperor. The Christian community in Rome includes Jewish Christians as well as Gentile Christians. We don't know, nor did Paul, whether these Jewish and Gentile Christians are mostly mixed together in congregations, or are mostly separated out into different congregations on the basis of their background and identity. But however they were gathered together when they heard Paul's words to them, these congregations are wrestling with what it means for them all to be one in the body of Christ, especially when the empire has made it clear some among them are especially unwelcome in their city and shouldn't feel entirely safe in the place they call home. How do these Christians express and experience unity when society seeks to separate and divide them, telling them they are in competition with each other and even that they ought to fear one another? They couldn't have helped but notice the difference between Paul's description of God's justice and peace and the justice and peace the empire meted out; how did they understand their relationships with God and with their neighbors when they heard these words? How did they listen well to one another and understand their differences and different struggles, even as they understood themselves to be brothers and sisters in the one body of Christ?

Perhaps, strangely enough, this is a place where, despite the centuries between us, we can identify with these first hearers of Paul's words as we hear his words from Romans. As we are gathered here at St. Barnabas this morning, how does Paul's description of God's justice and peace resonate, or not? How do our brothers and sisters in Christ, gathered at Redeemer Lutheran in North Minneapolis this morning, hearing these very same words from Romans, hear and see "justice" and "peace"? What about our brothers and sisters gathered at St. Paul's Lutheran in south Minneapolis, in a predominantly Latino neighborhood, how do they hear Paul's words? How are we expressing and experiencing unity in the body of Christ, with our brothers and sisters of different backgrounds and identities? How do we listen well to one another and seek to understand and respect one another? Do we?

Paul doesn't just raise these questions and then leave his hearers stuck in them. He goes on. He says we boast not only in God's presence among us, even in the midst of suffering, but we trust that even in the midst of suffering, God's presence is with us, and that what we suffer and endure can produce character and hope. And, he says, we know that God's "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."

When we hear God's love has been poured into our hearts, I suspect we get a warm, fuzzy feeling. While I think that is quite appropriate, and in fact God's love for us produces a warm, fuzzy feeling even in God, what Paul meant was something a little different. When we hear the word "heart" we think of feeling and emotion. But Paul and his contemporaries understood the heart quite differently – for them, the heart was the seat of the will, of decision-making and action and priority. To say God's love has been poured into our hearts means that the same love that moved God to act in Jesus Christ frees us now to also act, as the body of Christ.

Paul has been talking about love all along in this letter to the Romans, as he described God's activity through history, through Abraham and Sarah, and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in whom we are justified. God has been moved by love to act: in creating humanity, in making and fulfilling promises and establishing covenants with humanity, and in renewing those promises and reestablishing those covenants when humanity has failed to keep them. We who believe Jesus Christ to be the fullest expression of God's love, to be God's very heart, believe that in Jesus Christ God has not just felt love for us but also acted in love on our behalf.

We heard it in Matthew's gospel today too. Jesus feels compassion for the crowds. But he doesn't only feel, he also acts: he heals, he cleanses, he casts out evil, he proclaims the good news. And he sends his disciples to do the same in his name. God's justice, peace, hope, and love are made known in God's gracious activity. Christ has acted decisively to make God's love manifest, and the Holy Spirit empowers us to do likewise.

This is the justice and peace God has established. This is the hope which does not disappoint us. This is the love poured into our hearts. This is the faith in which we baptize. When a person is baptized, together as a congregation we speak words of welcome to them, which begin: "We welcome you into the body of Christ and the mission we share...". The body of Christ and its mission are inseparable – its feelings and actions are intertwined, its love is made known through its deeds. The love which moved God to act for us, the love which Christ made manifest among us, the love poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit: this love has made us God's people, joins us to the body of Christ, and frees us to act with love on behalf of others. This love poured into our hearts cannot run dry; it fills us and through us spills out into a world desperately parched, thirsting for God's justice, peace, hope, and love.