

Romans 8:12-25

¹²So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— ¹³for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!”

¹⁶it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God,

¹⁷and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

¹⁸I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

Martin Buber, and early 20th century Jewish philosopher offered these words concerning the relationship between God and humankind:

Where I wander-You!
Where I ponder-You!
Only You, You again, always You!
You! You! You!
When I am gladdened-You!
When I am saddened-You!
Only You, You again, always You!
You! You! You!
Sky is You, Earth is You!
You above! You below!
In every trend, at every end,
Only You, You again, always You!
You! You! You!

There is something beautiful and yet mysterious about the lessons for today. Psalm 139 reminds us that God knows us more intimately than any love we have ever known. God knows our guts, both literal and figurative. God knows our thoughts and our actions. God created us and breathed life into us and when came into the world, God looked at us and *knew* us better than anyone or anything. God looked at us and *loved* us more than anyone or anything. A love that gives us the courage to stand on our feet and make mistakes. A love that celebrates our accomplishments and grieves with us when we experience times of sorrow. This is the God of David. This is the God of the Psalms. This is the God of Christ. This is the God of Paul. This is the God of love that I so adore. In Romans, Paul, reminds us of this love.

I must admit, Paul and I have always had a complicated relationship. For years I struggled with Paul. After all, he is the one who is quoted when people want to tell me to be quiet and sit down because I am a woman who answered God's call. To read about the kind of person Paul was prior to his conversion experience is troublesome. He was a tormentor, an abuser, a persecutor of the early Christians. He was not a nice person. He was quite awful actually. I never liked him until I learned more about him and the context in which he wrote. Only then did my appreciation of Paul grow.

I am now convinced that Paul worked tirelessly to change his reputation. I think Paul wanted to be remembered as a person of love and an agent of change, rather than a person of hate and fear. His letters to various churches actually paint him to be more progressive than what I was taught as a youth. Paul gives instructions to wives on how to treat their husbands, but he also does something unheard of for that day and time, he gives instructions to the men as well. He tells them how to be husbands and fathers. He was fair in doling out his belief based advice. He recognizes women in ministry as his colleagues and offers them his support. Paul writes these letters to churches as a way to help them grow, not just in faith, but in love for one another. Reminding them that Christ is for everyone, not just Jews or Gentiles, but for all. He reminds people of the love Christ has for us and how it is up to us to continue to spread the message of love and NOT a message of hate.

This letter to the church in Rome is likely one of Paul's last letters, but it shows up as the first in the bible. Perhaps that is because it so clearly outlines the message Paul is trying to convey, which according to Eugene Boring is this: The universal sinfulness of humanity has been met by the gracious act of God in Christ as worked out in God's plan for history that includes Jews and Gentiles, which forms the basis for Christian living.

All of this is done, not in an essay, but in a personalized letter to remind the church of the close personal connections they have with God and should be building with one another.

Paul writes to remind the readers that we are ALL children of God. We are ALL heirs, we all have an inheritance to claim, to share, and that inheritance comes from a place of hope. Hope that saves, not just humanity, but ALL of God's creation.

In June, our middle school and high school youth participated in a week of Mission and Mischief. Throughout the week we had a combined 13 youth and 8 adults who pulled off various activities and service projects. Every morning, before we got started, we met for a brief bible study. Every day we read a version of Matthew 25 or an article written about Matthew 25 and we talked about the importance of what we were doing.

In case you are not familiar with Matthew 25, it is the text where Jesus tells his followers that when they fed the hungry, or clothed the naked, or visited the imprisoned, or healed the sick, they were doing it to him.

We helped at Eye Thrive, a local agency with a mobile eye clinic that travels to our local schools and performs free eye exams AND offers a new pair of glasses for children which are made right there on the spot so that children can wear them that very day. No insurance required. At Trinity Presbyterian Church we made food kits for children who are home this summer and going without since they do not have access to the free school meals during the summer time. We created 6 casseroles for the St. Patrick Center. And we made 4 cute blankets for children who are patients at Barnes Children's Hospital. With each of these activities we talked about what we were giving: comfort, love, and hope. We talked about the importance of being Christ in the world and also seeing Christ in the world. It was an incredible week and I am so thankful for the youth who participated and the adults who chaperoned and drove and helped make that week happen.

I believe the God who knows us so intimately, was watching and was filled with love and hope as our young people not only helped so many during that week, but also saw others through the lens of love?

What I cannot understand is how people can look at one another and see anything but love? After all, we are all children of God, how can we look at one another and see anything less than a part of God's creation to be loved.

This is why I believe Paul wrote his letters, to remind us of this amazing love. And this letter is needed just as much today as it ever was. To remind us that even when families are divided and turn against one another, when parents disown children or children disown parents, even then, you are a part of God's family. You are God's child. Always known. Always known...always...Always loved...always.

Mission and Mischief was just one of the ways we can show that love. And letting others know they are God's beloved child is so important. It can change the course of a life.

The late great Dr. Fred Craddock recalled the story of he and his wife Nettie vacationing in Gatlinburg, TN where they were eating breakfast at a little restaurant and hoping to enjoy a quiet meal together.

While they were waiting for their food they noticed a distinguished looking white haired man going from table to table and talking to guests. Craddock looked at his wife and said, "I hope he doesn't come over here." But sure enough, the man did come to their table.

"Where are you folks from?" he asked.

"Oklahoma," they answered.

"Great to have you in Tennessee." He answered. "What do you folks do for a living?"

Craddock answered, "I teach at a seminary."
"Oh! You teach preachers how to preach. Well, I have a story for you." and with that the man pulled up a chair.

"You see that mountain over there? There was a boy born to an unwed mother. (back then it was scandalous to have a child out of wedlock). That boy had a hard time because everywhere he went people would ask him, "Who's your daddy?"

"Whether he was at school, the grocery store or drug store, people would ask the same question, 'Who's your daddy?' He would hide at recess and lunchtime from other students. He would avoid going into stores because that question hurt him so bad."

"When he was about 12 years old a new preacher came to his church. He would always arrive late to church and leave early so he could slip in and out without being asked that hurtful question. But one day, the new preacher said the benediction so fast he got caught and had to walk out with the crowd.

He just about made it to the back door when the new preacher put his hand on his shoulder and, not knowing anything about him, turned to the boy and asked, 'Son, who's your daddy?'"

"The new preacher could sense the little boy was scared and the tension around him and he said, 'Wait a minute! I know who you are. I can see the family resemblance now. You are a child of God.'"

"And with that he patted the boy on the shoulder and said, 'Boy, you've got a great inheritance. Now go and claim it.' And with that the boy smiled and whenever people asked him, 'Who's your daddy?' he would respond, 'I am a child of God.' The man said, 'Isn't that a great story?'"

The Craddock's agreed, it was indeed great.

The man stood up and said, "You know, if that preacher hadn't told me I was one of God's children, I probably wouldn't have amounted to anything."

After the man walked away, Dr. Craddock called their server over and asked, "Do you know who that man was who just left sitting at our table?"

The server replied, "Of course. Everybody knows him. That's Ben Hooper. He's the former governor of Tennessee."

How we treat one another matters. What we say and what we do matters. I bet the people of that small mountain town in Tennessee thought of themselves as good god-fearing Christian people. Yet their words, spoken to a child no less, cut deep. Those words wounded that child. He had to sneak in and out of church to avoid people.

We're human. It's bound to happen. We are quick to judge and jump into a he said/she said mentality. We can hurt people and tear them down,

or we can love people and lift them up. And it's not just the people in the pews, but the people in the pulpits who can share love or cause damage.

When I was a teenager, my first job was working for a minister who saw something in me and affirmed my calling to ministry. He is a large part of the reason I am here. Fast forward several years, I was out of seminary and newly ordained, serving on the staff at a church where the pastor caused me such grief that I almost left ministry for good, all within the first year of my ordination. Fortunately, I remembered the positive of many instead of the negative of one.

All this is to say, we are going to mess up. Our words and actions will sometimes hurt others, BUT, we can change that. We can stop and remember that we are a child of God and ask ourselves how a child of God would respond to this issue or this person. Would a child of God say and/or do something hateful? Or hurtful? Or, would a child of God be loving and lift up the other person? Then, we have to stop and remind ourselves that the person we are wanting to lash out against, they too are a child of God. Not just within these walls but outside the doors of this church as well. Only when we help others and remember who we are and whose we are, can we live into the loving community we are called to be, where we are all heirs of God claiming our inheritance. And that inheritance is far greater than anything any of us can imagine. How great it is to be a child of God!

How great it is to live a life where we are called to be change in the world through love. To be led by the Spirit, welcoming others into our amazing family-one where all are welcomed and all are loved.

This is what it means to be a child of God. To know you are loved and to spread that love to all we meet. May we live into being the children God calls us to be today, tomorrow, and always. Amen.