

The Heart of the Matter
Sermon on Romans 5:1-5 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, June 3, 2007

I left the country two weeks ago without having turned in this morning's sermon title to our communications department for publication in the *Dallas Morning News*. I should apologize to the communications director who was forced to advertise not the sermon title but a generic invitation to join us in Cox Chapel for services at 8:30 and 11:00. I'm not terribly fond of generic things. I know that I could probably save tons of money by buying the generic brands at the grocery store, but I have deep-seated suspicions about generic corn flakes and peanut butter. Officially, "generic" means relating to or describing an entire class of things. The word generic screams all-purpose, general, common. Whereas a generic drug might be cheaper than, but equally effective as its brand-name counterpart, would you want a generic wine, i.e. one that is a blend of grape varieties as opposed to a single variety?

Normally I wouldn't raise the issue of generic items in a sermon, except that it seems to pop up fairly frequently in relation to the question of God. I am often asked, "Do Christians believe in the same God as Jews and Muslims?" These are, after all, the great monotheistic faiths, each claims ancestry through Abraham, and each recognizes Jesus as being an important person. The question also arises in connection to American civic religion. It seems that no politician can conclude a speech without the line, "God bless America." Our money is imprinted with the motto, "In God we trust." Prayers at football games and commencement ceremonies and the opening of legislative sessions are all offered to God. But just exactly what God do the politicians and printers and players have in mind? It seems to me that in interfaith and political matters, the God we blithely invoke is a rather generic God: not specific, particular, or exclusive, but general, broad, and inclusive, a god Stanley Hauerwas has termed the "ultimate vagueness."

This ill-defined, broadly-construed god is quite utilitarian: He can be thanked for giving us things like food and friends and beseeched for things like victory in football games and blamed for things like natural disasters and human cruelty or an untimely death. A vague or generic god can do just about anything we have in mind and serve virtually any theological purpose for which we have a need. A generic god is good to have on hand in case of emergency, all the more so if he stays off in his corner of the world, quietly minding his own business.

Unfortunately for good, respectable Methodists who have mastered the art of not giving offense, the God we celebrate on Trinity Sunday is not a vague generality or a generic deity. The God worshiped by the Church is a God with a particular identity, a God with a name, a God Who has acted in quite specific ways in human history. The God we worship is the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—omniscient and omnipotent, co-equal and co-eternal, one in three and three in one.

In recent years, the predominantly masculine language we use to name the persons of the Trinity has come under fire as being patriarchal and giving insufficient weight to more feminine aspects of God such as love and compassion. In place of Father, Son, and Spirit, it has been suggested that God be called Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. While this terminology neatly avoids the sticky wicket of the politics of gendered language, it is erroneous in its assumption and disastrous in its consequences. To call God “Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer” is to mistake God’s role or actions for the name of God. I eat and preach and go for hikes, but my name is Jeff, not eater, preacher, and hiker. To call God by his actions is reductionistic and it leads to the mistaken notion that each person of the Trinity is responsible for only one action. The Bible goes to particular pains to show that the divine work of creation, redemption, and sustaining is the work of all three persons of the Godhead: Genesis affirms that in the beginning

God created the heavens and the earth and that the spirit of God hovered over the face of the abyss. God spoke and life came into being. The Fourth Gospel tells us that in the beginning the Word was with God and the Word was God; that Word became flesh and dwelt among us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit were all present at and involved in the creation of the world.

So, too, are Father, Son, and Spirit involved in the redemption or salvation of sinful humanity. It is this God, the God of Scripture and the God of Israel, who according to St. Paul, “raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:24c-25). It is this that distinguishes Christianity from all other religious traditions. Rather than a god who controls the weather or hands out goodies or metes out punishment for violations of divine law, the God of Jesus Christ acts out of love on our behalf by giving himself to us. God sent his Son to fulfill the requirements of the law—demands for things like obedience and justice and compassion—because our sins mean that we could not keep God’s law. When we responded to God’s self-giving by putting his Son to death on a cross, God answered not with vengeance but with resurrection. God raised Jesus from the dead in order to justify us: to remove our guilt and shame, to take away the punishment of death, to restore us to a right relationship with God. This gift of justification, this act of sheer grace, is communicated to us through the Holy Spirit at work in our hearts. Thus the work of redemption is not simply the work of one Person of the Trinity: it is the work of a loving Father, an obedient Son, and a transforming, grace-giving Spirit.

This brings us to the heart of the matter: “[S]ince 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” (5:1-2). Justification,

God's act of love to pardon and forgive our sins in order to restore us to right relationship with God, has two important results.

First, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Because God has acted to save us in the death and resurrection of Jesus, we are no longer alienated from, enemies of, at war with God. C. K. Barrett points out that having peace with God and being justified are virtually synonymous "since justification puts an end to the legal strife between [God the] Judge and accused."¹ Charles Wesley explained justification this way in "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing": "He breaks the power of canceled sin, / He sets the prisoner free; / His blood can make the foulest clean, / His blood availed for me." But having peace with God involves more than the absence of conflict; it also involves the more positive sense of what the Israelites called *shalom*: a sense of well-being and wholeness. While we can feel or experience peace with God, this peace is not simply a subjective feeling or a positive experience because it is actually a new relationship with God—a right relationship with God, a relationship of graceful friendship.

The second result of justification is that we can have hope, "confident hope", in sharing the glory of God. In Romans 3 Paul acknowledged that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," and then went on to say that we "are now justified by [God's] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ" (vv. 23-24). It is because of God's gift of grace—God's love and mercy, which we neither merit nor earn—that we are made right with God. And that grace is the ground of our hope of sharing in the life of God. Joseph Fitzmyer says, "Christ has made it possible that Christians should boast of a share in the glorious life of God himself. With the resurrection of the Christ the aeon of the risen life has begun, and Christians may

¹ C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Revised Edition, Black's New Testament Commentary (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991) 95.

expect a share in it.”² It is this confidence in what God has done to share his life with us that leads Charles Wesley to sing: “No condemnation now I dread; / Jesus, and all in Him, is mine; / Alive in Him, my living Head, / And clothed in righteousness divine, / Bold I approach th’ eternal throne, / And claim the crown, through Christ my own.”

This, friends, is the good news, the very heart of the matter: God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, God who created us in his image, has also redeemed us, saving us from sin. The Father sent the Son who died and was raised for our justification—our pardon, our forgiveness—to restore us to right relationship with God. Because we are justified through Jesus Christ, we have peace with God and boast in the hope of sharing the glory of God. And all of this is “because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (5:5). For his love, mercy, peace, and hope, thanks be to God. Amen.

² Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 33 (New York: Doubleday, 1993) 396.