

“Hope that Does Not Disappoint”

Romans 5:1-8

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The Rev. Dr. David A. Van Dyke

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For Reformed people of faith, today's brief passage from Paul's letter to the Romans is a treasure trove of material that sheds light on what we mean when we say we are Reformed.

It introduces that great theological doctrine known as Justification—a concept that propelled Martin Luther forward in his fundamental conviction that salvation is a gift of grace and that it comes from God alone. And further, that this gift is totally up to God.

The doctrine of Justification essentially asserts that through Jesus Christ, we have already been justified in the eyes of God—we have been made forever right with God. And, as an ultimate act of God's grace, we have been justified apart from anything about us. In fact it happened while we were still weak or, while we were yet sinners. We didn't have to do anything to make ourselves right with God, in fact we could never do that. The good news is that God's got us covered.

And that discovery marked a radical turning point for a young Martin Luther who, until that time, had been living with a great deal of torment and anguish over this question: If a righteous God demands justice, who then can stand before God? Who can possibly measure up to and meet God's expectations?

And he thought the answer was that ultimately, no one could do that. No one could humanly, do enough, pray enough, grovel enough or repent enough to ever gain their way back into God's favor. And the liberating, life changing and life giving good news is that we don't have to. We don't have to do any of that. Through the gift of grace and in the person of Jesus Christ, we have been justified by God. Our only job is to believe it and accept it in faith.

Of course that discovery also led to Luther's great disappointment and frustration with the church he loved and was committed to serving as a young priest, because the church was teaching otherwise. Salvation and forgiveness were transactions, often financial, between the church and the devout faithful.

Luther found himself at odds with the church's practice and deeply troubled by it. And so he sought to reform the church and posted his now famous, or infamous, depending on your perspective, Ninety-five Theses on the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg.

And while it marked the beginning of what became known as the Protestant Reformation, a movement that swept throughout Europe and eventually around the world, and which will celebrate its 500th Anniversary this fall, it also brought the wrath of an ungrateful church raining down on Martin Luther.

Deemed a heretic and an outlaw, he was put on trial. His writings were banned and anyone offering him food or aid was considered to be breaking the law. So is it any wonder that, in addition to Paul's writing about justification that satisfied his restless soul over finding favor with God, that Luther also identified with Paul's language about suffering. Martin Luther found a kindred spirit in the Apostle Paul. They both lived their faith and paid a price for it.

And so Paul, writing in the fifth chapter of his letter to the Romans says this,

We boast in our sufferings, for suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint for God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Of course the young reformer could identify with Paul's words. But it's also the kind of lesson a good father might have taught his children. Not in a, "Hey, look at me," kind of way. But in the quiet, faithful living of a life where those things were simply born out through the honor of hard work and the ever present, ongoing care and nurture of the family.

Paul is talking about a hope that does not disappoint, and that is sometimes a hard concept to imagine. Because for all of our triumphs, and even if the number of successes we experience in life far exceeds the number of disappointments, it's the disappointments that have a way of sticking to us and haunting us. Do you know what I mean?

In so many ways—ways that are known to some but also in ways born out alone, we live in worlds of disappointment. Where our dreams fall short and the expectations we have for others and even ourselves, often miss the mark. And some have known enough disappointment in their life that they keep themselves from hoping that things will ever get better. Over time, they lose the ability to hope because they don't want to be disappointed one more time.

Father's Day weekend, I know, is a mixed bag for many. It does not evoke loving, tender memories for everyone. Maybe the relationship you had with your father was a complicated one. He was a complicated man who had his own difficulties and struggles—his own baggage that saddled him. But the end result was that he disappointed you on many occasions.

Perhaps his suffering did not produce endurance like it did in others, but rather a caving in to the pressures he felt. And without the capacity or strength to endure, character never materialized in him and he disappointed you. Probably not as much as he disappointed himself, however. That happens, and adult children often live with that for years.

On the other hand, sometimes being a father isn't easy. You struggle watching your children grow and make mistakes and choices that you cannot condone. And you want so desperately for them to choose a wiser path, to find a better way and better friends, to rise to the level you know they are capable of achieving, and yet all you can do is watch, aching inside of yourself as you console your quiet disappointment.

Maybe you are a dreamer—a romantic even, and you worry that sometimes your emotions get out ahead of you. You want so desperately to believe in the goodness of others. You want to believe in those cherished American principles, dreams and opportunities—or you want to believe that ultimately ours is a nation of fairness and justice, and where hard work gets rewarded, and yet time after time your hopes and dreams have left you disappointed and discouraged because you've seen this country and its leaders and institutions not live up to the best of our abilities, let alone our expressed ideals.

Maybe for you, and for whatever reason, disappointment isn't so much a temporary state as it is a chronic condition. Something you live with and carry, day in and day out—unable to shake off.

The kind of hope Paul was talking about, the kind of hope that does not disappoint is a hope rooted in the unshakable, never-ending love of God. It is a hope that triumphs over all other disappointments and setbacks we may experience in this life.

It is a hope that does not disappoint because it is based on an endurance forged in difficulty and character building events, over which we have triumphed because this hope is rooted in the love of God. And it is a hope that can overcome any feelings of self-doubt or unworthiness you may experience. It is a hope that won't leave us stuck in the past trying to find our own way forward. It is a hope that is established in the knowledge that God loves us in spite of ourselves—loved us, in fact, while we were yet sinners.

I am so pleased that we had a baptism today because what we do together in that sacrament, what we celebrate in baptism, as children of God, is the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ as Paul was declaring it to the Romans.

There is a lovely baptismal liturgy used in the Church of Scotland. It's very similar to the Presbyterian Church (USA) liturgy I used a few moments ago. But just prior to actually doing the baptism, and while holding the child in his or her arms, the minister addresses the child by name and then speaks directly to the child saying,

It was for you that Jesus Christ came down into the world, struggled and suffered; for you he endured the agony of Gethsemane and the darkness of Calvary; for you he cried, "It is accomplished"; for you he died and for you he conquered death; yes, for you, little one, you who know nothing of it as yet. Thus, the Apostle's words are confirmed, "We love God because God first loved us."

People of God, we love God why? So that God will love us in return? No!

We love God because God first loved us!

Therefore, since we are [already] justified by faith...

Because God so love the world...God sent the Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be save through him (John 3:17).

God proves his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.

Friends, through the lavish, never ending love God, and the amazing grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, we, as people of faith, as children of God, have a hope that will never disappoint us.

Believe it. Trust it. Live it.

Sing it!

Amen.