

“Good News of Which to Be Proud”

Romans 1:11-17, Reformation Sunday, Oct 26, 2014

“There is just not enough, of me to go around!” We’ve probably all said at this at times, haven’t we!?! Especially during those times when we are supposed to be in **three different places** at once! We all know what it means to live with certain constraints on our time! And we all have those times when, if you’ll pardon an old expression: **“We feel like chickens running around with our heads cut off!”** The apostle Paul must have occasionally felt this way too. For his, was a big task that the Lord God almighty had set before him! To the Ephesians he writes: *“Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ!”* (Ephesians 3:8)

St. Paul was not instrumental in establishing the church in Rome but he was, nevertheless, well-acquainted with many of its members! For in the closing chapter of this letter he gives his personal greetings to **25 different members there**; mentioning each of them **by name (Romans 16:3-15)**. And then Paul goes on to tell everyone in that whole church to: **“Greet one another with a holy kiss (v. 16)”!** Someone once said that if we still did that today, we might all come to our worship services a half-hour earlier in order to choose our seats a little more carefully!

Well, obviously there were some people in that Roman congregation who were feeling “slighted” because the Apostle Paul had not yet carved out enough time in his busy schedule to come by and visit with them in person. They wanted him to come and to take his place in their pulpit on a Sunday morning so that he might preach to them one of those “barn-burner” types of sermons for which his reputation certainly preceded him. Still today we sing: **“If you cannot speak like angels, if you cannot preach like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus! You can say he died for all!”** (LW 318:2)

So Paul is offering to them in the opening words of this magnificent letter, at least a **mild form of an apology** when he writes to them: *“For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you!”* Yes Paul was looking forward to preach the good news of the Gospel to them of which he was **certainly not ashamed**. But Paul also knew from his years of experience in ministry, that that he would not be able to go there to preach the Gospel to them, to worship with them, to pray with them, and to celebrate the Holy Eucharist with them---without having his own faith strengthened by them in this process too! *“For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine!”*

Then Paul goes on to offer at least a mild apology for not getting to their place sooner! Paul continues, *“I want you to know brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles! I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish, hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome!”* (13-15)

Here, Paul, who many years before this had come to experience the great freedom for himself that Jesus is talking about in the words of our Gospel lesson today, even as Dr. Martin Luther in the course of his young life, came to experience by the grace of God too, is still will to speak of himself as a **“debtor!” (v.14)** St. Paul is expressing his belief here that God had not only revealed the Gospel to him for his own benefit, but just as importantly, if not more importantly, for the benefit of the Gentiles; with Gentiles signifying every other human being in the human race who was not Jewish in their ethnicity as well as in their profession of faith!

Paul’s understanding of his own personal relationship to the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that he was like a banker, or a trustee serving as a power of attorney, to whom a great deal of money had been entrusted by an elderly grandparent for the benefit of the minor

grandchildren, as yet too immature to handle their own financial affairs. To the degree in which the trustees hold those securities in his own name, he is indebted to the one from whom they were made eventually available. Paul's compelling sense of indebtedness to God for his grace and to people because of his ministry meant that he was never free to feel that his work was done.

Just as Paul felt that he was indebted to the whole human race to share with them the Gospel that God had first revealed to him on the road to Damascus, **Paul invites us to live with that good sense of indebtedness too**, when he says earlier in this same letter, *"Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another; for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law"* (Romans 13:8)!

The world was shocked when actress/singer Whitney Houston was found dead in her suite at the Beverly Hilton Hotel on Saturday, February 11, 2012. Many different people either sang or spoke at her funeral at the New Hope Baptist Church in Newark, New Jersey. One of those who spoke at the service was actor Kevin Costner, who played the part of her bodyguard in the movie, "The Bodyguard."

Kevin Costner started by saying that he and **Whitney had something in common**. Then he went on to say the following: **"She's a woman, and I'm a man. She's black and I'm white. So what do we have in common?"** He said, **"We were both raised in the Baptist Church."** Then Costner went on to tell about his life as a child in the Baptist Church and compared his life to Whitney's in the Baptist Church. And of course, he said some very nice things about her when she auditioned for the part in the movie and her life in general and in regard to the New Hope Baptist Church. Certainly in a spirit of politeness most people when eulogizing another usually will not say anything bad about the deceased, out of respect for the one who has died and for their family.

But you and I know that Kevin Costner had something else much more in common with Whitney Houston—that we all have in common with Whitney Houston and with Kevin Costner too. Do you know what that is? **The Bible calls it "sin;" sin that St. Paul defines in Romans as the "transgression of God's law" (I John 3:4)** Left to ourselves, we are all in the same boat; and the same boat in which we are sinking day by day. And like Paul points out in our text, it doesn't matter if we are male or female, rich or poor, black or white, educated and sophisticated or illiterate and lacking many social graces, we are all like Whitney Houston and Kevin Costner sinners in need of God's divine salvation that God makes available to us through the perfect life, death and resurrection, of his only-begotten Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Isn't this what we hear St. Paul saying to us in our epistle lesson this morning in **Romans 3:23**, *"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God!"*? Because we are all in the same boat and the same boat that is sinking, we are all indebted to one another, and to the whole human race as well, to share with the whole world as boldly, and personally, and powerfully and winsomely and as unashamedly as we possibly can! For ours is Good News of which we are proud! The Gospel of Jesus Christ was good news of which St. Paul was immensely proud! The Gospel of Jesus Christ was the good news of which Dr. Martin Luther was always immensely proud. That's why he could say with his soul-mate, this beloved apostle of God: *"For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith; to the Jew first and also to the Greek!"* (v. 16)

When Kevin Costner was speaking at the funeral service for Whitney Houston he said to millions of people on the airwaves that he and Whitney shared a common heritage in the Baptist Church. I wished he had said that they had another great heritage they shared that they were both by nature sinners and both saved by the grace of God through the shed blood of Jesus on that old rugged cross! Out of fairness, to Kevin **Costner, he did say that she had stumbled in life; as he at times has stumbled in life.** This

was probably the kindness way he could think of to openly acknowledge to the world the problem that anyone who genuinely knew Whitney Houston; **the great problem she had with drugs and chemical substance abuse. Whether it's drugs, or something else, we've all stumbled in life; we've all stumbled when it comes to sin.**

But let's remember what St. Paul goes on to say next: *"I am a debtor to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish—hence my eagerness to proclaim the Gospel to you also in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith; to the Jew first and also to the Greek! For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith!'" (Romans 1:14-17)*

On January 13, 2012, the Costa Concordia struck a rock in the Tyrrhenian Sea just off the shore of Isola del Giglio, near the western coast of Italy. This tore a 160 foot gash in her hull. With water flooding in and listing, the ship drifted back to Giglio Island, where she became grounded, lying on her side in shallow water. **By the grace of God, all but 32 of the 3,229 passengers and 1,023 crew were saved. How did their salvation in that particular instance come about?** Apparently it was each man out for himself! And we are all familiar with that saying aren't we? When we say, **"It's every man for himself,"** then we mean that everyone in a dire situation is trying to save themselves from a difficult situation without trying to help anyone else!" **One newspaper article stated: "Survivors who escaped a luxury cruise liner that ran aground and tipped over off Italy's coast recounted a chaotic and terrifying evacuation through the ships upended hallways on Saturday, as divers searched the submerged part for any people still unaccounted for in the confusion! Surely, there must have been some passengers who put their own lives at risk to help others, but there were many, it seems, who had no regard for anyone else.** They were going to get off that ship as soon as possible and no one had better get in the way!

You know, as I read and studied and thought about and prayed about these words of St. Paul in our sermon text this Reformation Sunday, I found myself **confronted once again with a highly personal question: "I am more interested in my own salvation than I am of the salvation of others? Do I genuinely care about other people? Do I want to see as many people as possible around me be saved from God's judgment upon them because of their sins and come to the liberating knowledge of God's great liberating truth?"**

I'd like to think I am as interested in the salvation of other people as much as I am interested in my own salvation, but I am sure I feel that way much more at certain times than I do at others! **But this is certainly one quality that has always made Dr. Martin Luther a real hero in my eyes; and for which I learned in seminary from my professors, many years ago, that Luther certainly had a close kinship, spiritually speaking, to the Apostle Paul!**

Do I take advantage of those countless opportunities that God sets before me to speak to others, when the time is right, about my own faith and the hope I have in Jesus Christ? One thing I hear Jesus saying to me in the Gospel lesson this morning, is that we are all by nature sinners yes, and captivated by sin in such a way that we could never free ourselves from a life of being completely dominated by our sin, except that he has come among us from God the Father in heaven to set us free. You see in that ancient world, slaves lived in the house of their masters, the same as the sons and the daughters of that slave owner lived in the master's house too, but there came a time when a servant would outlive his usefulness or her usefulness to the master of the house, when they would be asked to leave and go somewhere else. Or when the master of the house died, his children would receive an inheritance, but the slaves in the house did not. But Jesus is offering us a lifestyle here; an alternate lifestyle from the way that people out there live in the world today! And he is inviting all of us, properly understood, to come out of the closet as Christians and share our faith with everyone we can! But to do so, we must first be freed from the domination of sin, death and the power of Satan over our own lives first! "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free! If the Son sets you free, you will be free

indeed!" You will be set free from the guilt you would otherwise be carrying around with you, if you do not receive from Jesus the forgiveness of all your sins!

I like that old story about a mother who had two boys and one of them had a real problem with saying bad words. The mother was talking to a neighbor lady about the problem. She told her that she'd tried nearly everything to get the boy to stop saying bad words. She had paddled him, grounded him, taken things away from him, made him sit in a corner, etc. The neighbor lady said that if he were her son that she'd "backhand" him.

The next morning when the two boys came downstairs for breakfast, the mother ask the old boy, "What would you like for breakfast?" He said, "I want some of those blankety-blank, blankety-blank Post Toasties!" His mother just hauled off, back-handed him and knocked him to the floor!" She then asked her second son, "What would you like for breakfast?" He said, "I don't know but I am certain that I am not to ask for Post-Toasties!

Getting children to obey their parents has always been a challenging task, not only for parents, but for our Heavenly Father too. And yet for all of our disobedience, he never has back-handed us! Instead he sent his Son into this world to take all of the punishment that was rightly ours because of our disobedience upon himself!

We read in **Philippians 2**: *"Having emptied himself, he took on the form of a slave, being born in human likeness and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father!" (Philippians 2:7-11)*

Today we are grateful that the captain of our salvation did not desert us in our great hour of need, the only one who as the sinless Son of God could save us from the wretched trouble we were in. And yet another sad story told in connection with the sinking of the Costa Concordia cruise ship off the coast of Italy in January 2012, is that her captain was not willing to go down with the ship! He was one of the first ones to flee the ship and make his way safely to the shore. He is how that news story was reported on CNN: "The captain of the ill-fated cruise ship may have made significant errors that led to the wreck," the cruise line said late Sunday. "The route of the vessel appears to have been too close to the shore, and the captain's judgment in handling the emergency appears to have not followed standard Coasta procedures." Costa Cruises said in a statement. "The ship's captain, Francesco Schettino, was detained for manslaughter, causing a shipwreck and abandoning the ship while passengers were still on board, chief prosecutor Francesco Verusio told Italy's state news agency."

Well, we only have one more week to go, before all of those advertisements will at long last be off the airwaves again. November 4 is Election Day since it always falls on the first Tuesday in November when a national election is being held, which reminds me: Did you hear about that one politician who died and immediately went to heaven and was put in the front of the line? Someone called out to St. Peter, "Hey, why did you let this guy go to the front of the line? After all we have lots and lots of preachers, evangelists and Sunday school teachers waiting in this line too!"

Peter replied, "Yes, beloved, I know. But we have only one politician up here!"

Do you believe any politicians will make it to heaven? More importantly, do you believe you'll make it to heaven? That's the real question this morning for every one of us, isn't it? For through the Gospel the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith;" (Romans 1:17) meaning that only those who believe have the power and capacity to share it with those who do not yet believe it!

I know we all like to tell jokes about politicians as if theirs is the only profession in which ethical procedures are only ever violated, but we know that his simply isn't true! But believe it we ought to and to invite others to believe it unashamedly, together with us, we ought to do as well!

One day two little girls who were playmates had dumped out their pennies and were counting them, the pennies that had been saving in their piggy banks. One girl said, "I have 75 pennies," while the other said, "I have 100 pennies!"

"No," said the first little girl, "You have just 75 pennies like me; 75 pennies to the very penny, the same as I!" But the second little girl quickly replied, "My daddy said that when he came home tonight, he would bring me 25 more pennies, and so I already do have 100 pennies, of that you can be sure!"

Brothers and sisters—do you believe—together with me this good news of which we may be proud? Martin Luther one day wrote: "God our Father has made all things depend on faith so that whoever has faith will have everything, and whoever does not have faith, or all that he thinks he might have, in actuality has nothing! For the things that are seen are temporal, but the things that are not seen—they are eternal!" Amen