

We continue today in Paul's letter to the followers of Jesus in Rome. A quick catch up: between chapters 1 and 5, where we'll read today. Paul is called to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. In other words, Jesus Christ died for all: both Jews and the Greeks/Gentiles. Paul later goes on to accuse the gentiles of idolatry and describes its consequences. He then states- using a series of scriptural quotes- that both Jews and Gentiles are "under sin." Paul proclaims "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ," which has been revealed "apart from the law" but is "attested by the law and the prophets." Paul then draws a parallel to Abraham arguing that a gentile can be made righteous by faith, and through faith gentiles become descendants of Abraham. Remember from last week we talked about what the gospel is? It is the power of God's righteousness. What is the righteousness of God? One of the things that Paul is getting at here is how does one have a relationship with God. The problem that Paul is trying to solve is that in his world- just as in our world- is full of people who do not have love, care, or respect for others around them nor for God. Because of the problem of God's righteousness how can God- who deals justly and kindly- deal with the ungodly. The cross of Christ is what solves this. The shameful death of Christ unwinds this problem of how God and humanity relate to one another (workingpreacher.org, podcast). Paul argues consistently leading up to Chapter 5 "that the real power of gospel and the forgiveness of sin lies in faith, specifically the faithfulness of Jesus, which connects us to the 'righteousness of God.' Paul put it this way in his Letter to the Galatians: 'we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ' (2:16)" (Efrain Agosto, *Connections*).

Today's text acts as a hinge summarizing Paul's argument in chapters 1-4 and at the same time introducing chapters 5-8. There are many sermons in today's text and today I want to mainly focus on God's love poured in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. But before we turn to God's word for us this day, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

Before I begin, I want to be really clear about something. The suffering Paul references here does not speak for all suffering. What Paul is trying to say is that life is not always rosey. Sometimes we suffer. Sometimes we sin. But neither of those is pointless. Sometimes suffering can produce endurance that can ultimately lead to hope. This is not to say that we should seek out suffering in order to force ourselves to strengthen our hope. We don't need to seek out suffering- if we live long enough, suffering will always find us. Also, what Paul says about suffering are not guaranteed results. Suffering takes an enormous toll on persons, and its effects are often unpredictable. Some suffering does not lead to endurance. That is not the type of suffering to which Paul is referring. He is making a generalization. For general suffering, God's love offers us a pathway through. Even while we remain sinners, God's love offers us a way out of suffering and the state of sin. Here Paul is describing a state of being, the condition of his hearers' lives. Paul is ready to draw out implications for the life of faith beyond the cross and the empty tomb. He is thinking about being justified as not the end of the story but the beginning: "a beginning that offers entrance into a radically different way of living. For Paul, God reconciled the world to God through Christ (2 Cor. 5:18). Here Paul describes the wonder and

consequence of our having been justified by faith: peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, access to grace, and hope that does not disappoint us. All because “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (v. 5).

I am a child of the 80’s and was a young adult in the 90’s. I remember the summer before my senior year in high school and riding in a friend’s car with the windows rolled down, listening to the radio when Canadian rocker, Bryan Adam’s, song, *Everything I Do I Do It For You* played for the first time. I’m the kind of person that never knows the lyrics to a song, yet that doesn’t stop me from singing it out loud- in front of others who won’t sing until they know every word. Back in that day we had only cassette tapes, eight tracks, vinyl records, and the radio. I mainly listened to the radio. That meant that I heard this song A LOT, as it holds the longest consecutive reign for Number 1 single in chart history at 16 weeks! It also became famous from the movie *Robinhood: Prince of Thieves*, but I digress. This song played so much that eventually I DID learn the words and as I read today’s passage, these lyrics back to me. The bridge of the song is “I’d fight for you. I’d lie for you. Walk the wire for you. Yea, I’d die for you. You know it’s true. Everything I do I do it for you.” As cheesy as this song can be, it made me wonder about where the expression “to die for” originated. What does it really mean to die for something or someone?

Paul is more than likely dictating this letter to a scribe or secretary, which is the way most letters were written, and “you can often see how his

thoughts tumble over each other. For instance, in this passage, Paul begins by declaring that 'Christ died for the ungodly.' Then he starts thinking, 'What did I just say? Died for the ungodly? Who would die for an ungodly person? Most people wouldn't even die for a righteous person. Well...maybe a person might conceivably dare to die for a righteous person' ("although I doubt it," you can almost hear him thinking)" (Fleming Rutledge, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel*). Especially in verses 6 and 7, you can see how Paul is thinking out loud. Notice Paul doesn't say that Jesus died for his friends. He says that Christ died for the ungodly. He says that Christ died for us while we were his enemies. He says that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. "Notice the little word "still." While we were still sinners he died for us. That word carries a lot of freight. It means that we hadn't made any progress toward being sinless. Have you got that? A lot of religion is based on the idea that people can make progress toward being sinless. The Old Testament shows us that it's not true; the people of Israel flunked the Covenant, over and over and over. We can indeed make progress against our drinking or smoking or road rage or racism- and the Holy Spirit works in us to do that- but we remain sinners. In this life, there is never comes a time when we can stop saying, 'Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner'" (Rutledge). When we could not help ourselves- at a time that was right- Christ died for us. God did not wait for anyone to have enough strength on their own or stop being a sinner or being an enemy to pour out God's love. We all still want or need proof of God's love though, don't we?! This word justified is central to understanding the Christian gospel. Justification has positive effects: peace, access to grace, hope that does not

disappoint). Even the negative effects of our earthly existence (suffering) can often build endurance and character until our hope is fulfilled in the glory of God. For Paul, such a chain of events and effects is evidence of God's love and the free gift of God's Spirit (Agosto). This is granted not because of our own goodness but because of the goodness of God. The righteousness of God, the theme of Romans, "is actively transforming- it actually makes right what is wrong, and that was what Christ was doing when he died for us all" (Rutledge). God's love is exhibited for us in that death.

Did you hear in Georgie's baptism where we prayed these words... Send your Spirit upon Georgia that she, who now passes through these waters, may be delivered from death to life, from bondage to freedom, from sin to righteousness. And then as I held **Georgie**, I looked her in her eyes and told her and reminded us all of God's love poured out on each of us- for you Jesus Christ came into the world; for you he suffered and did battle; for you he went through the agony of Gethsemane and the darkness of Calvary; for you he cried, "It is fulfilled," for you he was triumphant over death. For you! And you, little child, do not yet know anything of all this. But thus is confirmed the word of the Apostle "we love because God first loved us." And God loves us more than our hearts can hold. And that is the challenge, isn't it? We struggle to believe that God really loves us through all our whiles...while we were in active addiction, while we cheated and lied, while we stole from someone, while we turned our backs on someone in need, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. No, we aren't sinless. We're

on a journey. We aren't there yet. But Paul says we're justified by faith; therefore, we have peace with God through Jesus; we have access to grace; and we have hope of sharing the glory- the goodness- of God. We have hope that does not disappoint. We have all of these things because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. What a gift! This powerful love of God so saturates us that we are certain of the hope, even though it is yet to come. Have you experienced that kind of love? If not, I invite you to ask the Holy Spirit to pour God's love into your heart. Don't give up...keep asking.

A pastor tells the story of a woman who met with him several times. This woman did not feel worthy of God's love. She lost her mother tragically and her life soon began unraveling and she made some bad choices in her life. She couldn't get passed the things she had done no matter how much the pastor spoke of God's unconditional love in her life, and she was visibly uncomfortable. She began fidgeting with a penny. While the pastor listened and talked, she would rub that penny in between her fingers, as if it were soothing her. A few days later, she left a note under his door. "Pastor," she wrote. "I've been thinking a lot about that penny I was playing with the whole time we were talking. Pennies go through a lot of stuff, too. They get passed from person to person and they get dropped in the mud; they get stepped on but no matter how dirty and beaten up they get, their worth stays the same. Some pennies are shiny and so together and some are weathered and beaten up. Just like people. I feel like I'm one of those dirty, worn out pennies- beaten and tossed into the gutter. But God used you to

pick me up and brush me off. You showed me I have worth and told me about a God who loves me and doesn't want me to dwell in the hate or to hurt or to be angry forever and for the first time I'm starting to think that maybe that could be true (The Wild Goose, Segment #1).

When we've experienced the love of God, we know because something changes within us. The Holy Spirit pours out God's love over us whether we deserve it or not. If you ever doubt it, read this text over and over again. That's the thing about God's gift of amazing grace- it is unearned and undeserved. We only need to accept it. Same with God's love. It is just that- a gift. Just like faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Faith- it's all that easy and all that hard. Why do you think Pastor Amanda and I pour the water in the font every week before we pray the Prayer of Confession?! It is a reminder of God's love poured in our hearts even while we were sinners. So...receive God's love from the Holy Spirit. What a gift! Amen.