

Grace Wins

Psalm 116:1-2; 12-19

Romans 5:15-17

A Swiss national, Karl Barth, taught theology at the University of Bonn, Germany. In 1933 he wrote a commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans. In 1934 he wrote the Barmen Declaration, one of our confessions. In it he systematically laid out how the Christian Church had to oppose the Nazis. In 1935 Barth was deported because he refused to sign an oath of loyalty to Hitler. Upon his arrival in Switzerland he personally mailed a copy of the Barmen Declaration to Der Fuhrer at his home in Berlin. As chaotic and frightening as our times may be, it is good to know that courageous people have led the church through serious trials before—and emerged from them bloodied but unbroken.

Back to Barth's commentary on Romans. Citing Adolph Julicher, another Reformed theologian, Barth admits that in Romans 5 the Apostle Paul, “discarded all logical thought”. After a long section of parallelism, in which Paul shows how sin came into the world through one man (Adam), and forgiveness also came into the world through one man (Jesus), in our verses with the claim that “the free gift is not like the trespass.” Oh yes it is, say Barth and all other orthodox theologians. We need not read Genesis three literally. We understand that Paul's claim that Adam brought sin into the world means that human nature is intrinsically sinful. We all sin and fall short of the glory of God, Paul writes in Romans 3:23. Therefore the free gift, the grace of

God embodied in Jesus Christ, is available to all as well.

The point of Romans 5:15-17 is that in Christ, God overcomes sin with grace. Grace wins. As another of our confessions, the Westminster Catechism, reminds us, grace is the “free gift of God”. We do not earn it. We cannot earn it. Out of boundless love God's grace washes over us, bringing forgiveness for our sins and even, Paul claims here, makes us righteous. Though we remain sinners, grace proves more than equal to the task of restoring our relationship with God. Three times Paul uses the phrase “much more”. Grace is much more than sin. Forgiveness is much more than legalism. Grace wins. And that, our times remind us, is a **very** good thing.

It turns out that Derek Chauvin and George Floyd probably knew each other. Chauvin, the Caucasian former policeman who murdered African-American Floyd during that arrest in Minneapolis, worked for seventeen years as a door bouncer at the El Nuevo Rodeo club in South Minneapolis. Floyd also worked there, doing security and other work like handing out paychecks. On Tuesday of this week St. Paul television station KSTP reported they'd had at least one altercation. Angry that his check was smaller than he expected, Chauvin struck Floyd. Floyd grabbed him and the two wrestled with enough force to knock over tables. Reporters Ana Lastra and Eric Rassmussen interviewed several of their co-workers, who recalled going to some effort to keep the two men away from each other until the club closed just last year.

I do not doubt that when Derek Chauvin had his knee on George Floyd's neck

he knew exactly whose life he was taking. Whatever the racial component of his attitude toward Mr. Floyd, Chauvin was extracting revenge. It was **personal**. Please understand: I am not trying to downplay racism, its prevalence and its potency. I am saying that to get a better measure of the depravity of Derek Chauvin we need to know all the ways he was connected to George Floyd. And now we must take another step, perhaps a difficult one for some of us. The Reformed tradition that produced Karl Barth and the Presbyterian Church (USA) also produced the understanding that the nature of **all** human beings is depraved. The distinction between Derek Chauvin and me is one of degree, not difference. I am a sinner. So, manifestly, is he.

That is what makes the message of Romans 5 such Gospel Good News: grace wins. Grace overcomes even the depravity lurking in all human hearts. The “abundance of grace” and the “free gift of righteousness” we receive through Jesus Christ overcome our sin. In recent weeks I have spoken of our need to confess our sin, in the current context specifically the sin of racism. I repeat that call today. Examine your head and your heart. What sinful attitudes do you have? In what destructive behaviors do you engage? Confess that sin, and God will forgive it. Then, God will move you to change those attitudes and behaviors.

For while forgiveness is a wonderful gift, confessing and receiving it does not complete the call upon Christians in the United States of America in 2020. The Interfaith Council of Terre Haute is the more progressive of the two local church and pastor alliances in town. Last week its members produced a public statement in

solidarity with the African-American community. After dozens of emailed editing suggestions, we published it. A day later one of our more thoughtful members wrote a message along the lines of, "I'm really proud of our statement. But I cannot escape the feeling that we haven't actually **done** anything yet." For grace truly to win we followers of Jesus must do more than simply seek forgiveness for our racial attitudes. We must do something about the situation.

I know a few Central folk have joined in demonstrations. This makes a start. But an African-American of my acquaintance recently sent me a text message from which I now quote: "I wonder if it's the virus. Are y'all (he meant white folks) out in the streets with us because you can't stand staying home any longer? My brothers and sisters are watching to see how long you're up for this." Non-violent protests have a proven track record in our society. They can bring change. They can change hearts and minds. They can change who's in power. They can change even the law. Joining our brothers and sisters in protest may be your calling. If so, stay with it.

Perhaps your calling is to establish relationships across racial lines. Perhaps it is to volunteer with organizations that serve minority communities. Mentoring a child at Deming Elementary through Kids' Hope would be a terrific way to do that. Perhaps it is to advocate with the powerful for those changes you believe are needed. Perhaps it is to work to address the root causes of poverty. Along with racism these roots are well known: the breakdown of the family (for decades now just as serious a problem in poor white communities), drug abuse, lack of access to real education, and so on.

These roots are deep. Pulling them up is tough. But they must come out of the ground before the children we mentor can have a chance.

The COVID-19 virus has depleted our stores. We are tired, tired of being afraid, tired of avoiding other people, tired of listening to all the gaslighting, opportunistic hucksters who appear like the demons in the movie *Ghost*, oozing out of the sewers whenever they see the opportunity to snatch a soul. They have used the pandemic to peddle their nasty ideas—on each side's extreme fringe. With the wisdom and patience that come from the Holy Spirit, ignore them. Ignoring them takes the hot air out of them and deprives them of the fuel for their hatred.

Psalm 116 is a hymn of thanksgiving for rescue, likely from a disease that nearly killed its author. Rescue from a disease that nearly killed. "I love the Lord," writes its author, "because he has heard my voice and my supplications." Victims of all stripes want their voices heard. Our African-American brothers and sisters want their voices heard. Hearing brings healing. It brings healing in a divided society. It brings healing in broken relationships with God. The remainder of the Psalm speaks of paying vows to God. This means the author has made vows promising to worship the Lord with greater consistency and intensity if he is healed. Now that he has, he means to keep his promises. Surely we have all already prayed for healing for our nation. When it happens, let us not forget whatever promises we make in those prayers. Let us give thanks and worship the Lord.

I have preached forty-eight Sundays a year for thirty-five years. I reckon I have delivered upwards of 1,700 sermons. I cannot remember ever speaking more critically of certain groups of people than I did last week, when I expressed my anger about those hard right and hard left fringe groups trying to hijack the Black Lives Matter moment. While I have now referenced these groups twice in today's sermon, I have no intention of mentioning them again. As I wrote this message I told a staff member I have never preached in a moment like this. No living pastor has. I asked her to pray for me. And here is what I believe those prayers yielded: grace wins.

The grace of God defeats human sin. Grace wins. The grace of God gives us the ability to listen to people who must have their voices heard. Grace wins. The grace of God moves us to take action to decrease the power of racism. Grace wins. The grace of God works through the Holy Spirit to give us the discernment to know which voices deserve to be heard, and which to be ignored. Grace wins.

Rev. Christopher Stackhouse is an African-American who delivered one of the eulogies given at George Floyd's funeral. In it he said, "(This time) I saw God's hand moving this way. (This time) when we looked across the landscape of America, I saw white evangelicals beginning to speak of the hate of racism ... I saw protests and there were as many white faces and Hispanic faces as there were black faces. They arrested all four officers. I saw police taking a knee and military taking off their riot gear. I see God's hands moving this way. I see the grace of God finally easing clenched hearts. Can I get an amen for the grace of God?" Yes, Rev. Stackhouse, you can. Amen.