

For Us  
Romans 5:1-8  
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota  
June 18, 2017  
Rev. Glen Bell

A few days ago I received a message from a friend, a young pastor serving a church in the Midwest. He and his congregation were wrapping up their budget work for the coming fiscal year, and he had question for me: How does one handle pay increases for church staff? What is the process? Who's involved? How do you decide about raises?

I wrote back with some basics. Everyone on staff has a position description and annual goals. Everyone receives a yearly review. The relative size of merit increases is determined by the annual review of each staff member.

Later in the week, I was talking with a good friend on the phone. He has just started as pastor of a large congregation in North Carolina, only to discover there are no position descriptions for any of the staff. The question becomes immediately clear: How in the world can anyone determine if someone is doing a good job if you're not even sure what the job is?

That conversation made me doubly grateful for our personnel elders here over the previous years: Lisa Saba, Carol Papa, Elaine Barnett, Kay Steinman – and many other fine people who came before them. Thanks to all of them, each staff member in our church has a position description.

That got me thinking: What is our job description as Christians? What is our identity statement and position description for each of us who follow Jesus?

We have come to this place and been baptized; we have been washed in the sparkling crystal water of God's mercy at the font. We have come to this place and shared the feast; we have found strength in the bread and cup.

We come to this place week after week, learning more about God each time. We come to this place experiencing an encounter with the Holy, discovering quiet miracles of peace and goodness and comfort.

Different Christians have, from time to time, tried to write a job description for Christians. In fact, there is one of sorts in our Presbyterian Book of Order, part of our church constitution. Here is what part of it says:

A faithful Christian "proclaims the good news" of Jesus "in word and deed." A faithful Christian "takes part in the . . . life" of a congregation. A faithful Christian "lifts one another up in prayer . . . and support." A faithful Christian "studies scripture." A faithful Christian "supports . . . the church through giving money, time and talents." A faithful Christian "works in the world for peace and justice."

All this involvement is a clear job description. We share about Jesus with others and strengthen the church and encourage each other and study the Bible and contribute to the church and work for peace and justice.

But it's easy to put the cart before the horse. It's easy to miss what is most important if we are trying to capture just the right items for a list.

Experiencing God and living in Jesus Christ is not mainly a list of ought's, not primarily a position description. It is quite different. Life in Christ and encountering the Holy Spirit is a joy, an experience of God's love and grace.

That's what you and I hear this morning in Romans. Through our faith, a gift of God, "we have peace with God through Jesus." Through Jesus, you and I have discovered the way to God's grace.

We have peace with God. We know God's grace – God's blessing and care and encouragement.

Two things strike me about that almost immediately. One, you and I always seem to get it backwards. Because we grade and evaluate anything and everything around our lives, we think the spiritual life must work that way too. We imagine if we proclaim the gospel and participate in the church and lift each other up and study the scriptures and give generously and work for peace and justice, THEN God will grant us grace and peace.

No, that's not right.

Actually it's the other way around. Before we deserve or anticipate it or even know how to respond to it, what to do with it, God grants us peace through Jesus Christ. In him, we discover grace and goodness. A free gift, no demands, no strings attached.

The Bible is clear. While we were weak, Christ died for us. God sent Jesus for us even though we were unprepared, anxious, grasping, really a mess.

That is the most important thing today – and the most important discovery every day – God grants us grace and peace, the beauty and wonder of grace and peace, without any preconditions or expectations.

Second, it is at that moment we embrace the joy of proclaiming and participating and encouraging and studying and working and giving ourselves away. God's love is so beautiful and God's grace so tender that we orient our lives

to share our faith in the most attractive way possible,  
to be around others who know the same joy,  
to strengthen sisters and brothers in their hopes and prayers,  
to learn more about the wonderful goodness in the Bible,  
to give ourselves with generosity so that others find grace and peace,  
to rescue the perishing and name our own discrimination and privilege,  
so that others may be freed.

We sing and rejoice. We greet one another with a hug or a smile. We forgive, letting go of our resentments. We release our anger or upset. We give generously, with open hands and hearts. All because "God's love has been poured into our hearts."

That's it. Those eight words. "God's love has been poured into our hearts." God's love . . . has been poured . . . into our hearts.

*(move down to the font and pour)*

That's what it's like. It's brimful and overflowing. It's amazing and unconstrained. It's more than we ever expect or think we deserve.

God's love is like laughing loudly. God's love is like discovering that lost jewel when we'd given up hope of finding it. God's love overflows.

There is one big problem though. Our world is still broken.

Almost five dozen have died in the Grenfell Tower fire in London. Violence and warfare continue unabated in Syria and Yemen. ISIS strikes in Tehran and the Philippines, as supporters commit violence in London and Paris. The special prosecutor continues his investigation of Russian meddling in our national election. A gunman kills three co-workers and then commits suicide in San Francisco. And most shocking of all, a member of the United States House of

Representatives is critically injured while playing baseball, shot because his assailant was angry about his political stance.

Sometimes our world seems angry, just angry.

The Apostle Paul, two thousand years ago, knew that we human beings are people of anger and resentment, disappointment and betrayal. He knew we are broken.

With great clarity, he reminds us that Jesus comes when we are weak and sinful. He reminds us today that the suffering of those who know

depression and despair,  
financial stress and bankruptcy,  
the oppression of white, male supremacy,  
and the stress of hunger and homelessness

is real – all too real.

Eight or eighteen year olds wonder about their next meal. Widows and widowers wonder *how?* in the midst of breathtaking loneliness. Democrats or Republicans only seem to hate Republicans or Democrats. In the midst of it all, Paul reminds us: Hope remains. Hope gives us strength. Hope will not disappoint us.

Hope will not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts.

God's love is stronger than anger and bitterness, stronger than depression and despair, stronger than oppression and discrimination, stronger than hatred and betrayal.

God's love is stronger than death.

When we go out those doors on this Father's Day, the brokenness will greet us. The darkness will not recede. The world will still be broken.

If he is deceased, we may still feel the ache of our father's loss, five or ten or fifteen years later. If he is alive, perhaps we may still not be able to find the words to get through to him. Or if we ourselves are a father, we may wish we could magically transport ourselves to Louisville or Indianapolis or Brooklyn or Orlando, at least for a few moments, to hug our precious children.

Days like today are not only sweet occasions to hug the ones we cherish, but also difficult occasions that magnify and multiply our losses. In this morning's Herald-Tribune, David McGrath remembers a magical day when he and his dad were out on Silver Lake together. David McGrath was ten years old, and his father was rowing. "He told me," McGrath writes, "of his dream to someday purchase the cabin we were staying in that week. He had this peculiar way of rowing, first the left oar, then the right, instead of both at once. The rhythm of his rowing, syncopated with the squeak of the oar locks, I can still hear today, like a movie soundtrack that stays in your head.

"I knew we were floating too slowly to make the green, balsa-wood bug pop and gurgle to attract fish. But I did not say so, hoping he would keep rowing that way, and rowing and rowing, and never stop."

Today we will hold tight to our memories. Even though the world is still broken.

And every day, every step, every moment, you and I will remember: God's love has been poured into our hearts.