

“Residents”
Romans 5:1-11/Luke 5:17-32
FPC/October 2, 2012 (World Communion Sunday)
By Rev. Dr. Glenn Hink

I. Introduction

This quote begins a controversial book:

“I believe that Jesus’ story is first and foremost about the love of God for every single one of us. It is a stunning, beautiful, expansive love, and it is for everybody, everywhere.” (Rob Bell, Love Wins, p. vii)

“This love compels us to question some of the dominant stories that are being told as the Jesus story. A staggering number of people have been taught that a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better. It’s been clearly communicated to many that this belief is a central truth to the Christian faith and to reject it is, in essence, to reject Jesus. This is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus’ message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear.” (Rob Bell, Love Wins, p.viii)

So begins preacher, pastor and writer Rob Bell in his recent book Love Wins. The book stirred up a hornet’s nest. He drew the ire of some Christians because he voiced the theology that God’s love in Christ claims all people....that all belong to God.....and at the end of all things God’s love wins. For that he has been called in some Christian circles a heretic, a blasphemer.....and someone going to the hell he doubts. Rob Bell and Love Wins was the cover story in the April 14, 2011 publication of Time magazine.

It’s an interesting thing to think about; why would there be so much vocal opposition to the message that God’s love wins? Bell himself points out that this is not some radical, new teaching from him. Rather this is a stream of theology that has been part of the deep, orthodox, church tradition. And our text today in Romans is one of the sources of this gracious theological tradition.

II. Text

Read Romans 5:1-11.

III. Brief Exegesis and Theological Reflection

“Peace with God.....suffering that leads to hope.....reconciled to God”Paul’s point is simply this; God’s power and love in Jesus Christ has changed everything.

Though we are faithless and sin, God is faithful, and overcomes sin in the death and resurrection of Christ. Our relationship with God has been restored. It has been done....or in Jesus' final words on the cross, "It is finished" (John 19:30). We belong to the God of grace. This includes everyone. We can trust God's grace and live a different way. And whatever the future holds, we trust God's grace and live with hope. God's love wins.

I am thankful for a number of ways that help me understand the significance of Jesus' death on the cross. One of those ways is called "substitutionary atonement," and that is what Paul is thinking about in this text in Romans. This theory, articulated by 11th C theologian Anselm, can be summarized as:

Human beings owe the holy God perfect obedience to stay faithful to the relationship with God;
But we have been faithless and sinned, breaking the relationship with God;
The situation is hell-separation from God under the powers of sin and death;
We have a debt to pay to restore the relationship, but because we are finite and fallible, we can't do it.....we can't help ourselves;
Only God can do it, but it is not owed by God, but by humanity;
Enter Jesus Christ, the "God-man," who is able to pay the debt because he's God, and can pay the debt for us as the representative human being....the substitute;
Divine justice is satisfied on the cross...the God-man Jesus Christ takes our place.....relationship with God is now restored once and for all.

Is this the only way to interpret the cross? As we stare into the mystery of the cross I will not say that "substitutionary atonement" is the only way. But it is helpful way. And it is what Paul has in mind here (note Rom. 5:1, 6, 8-10a). It may sound like strange justice that God, the offended party, pays the offenders' debts. And maybe it doesn't even really sound like justice at all. And that's the point: It is grace. In Jesus Christ God does everything. We do nothing. Everything has changed. The debt has been paid. The relationship with God has been restored. We belong to the God of grace.

And as we might expect, in Jesus we see everything has changed. He lives in this strange, new land called grace. In the stories from Luke 5 we catch a glimpse of what living in grace means:

A paralyzed man is healed;
Sins are forgiven;
An unlikely tax collector by the name of Matthew is called to follow Jesus;
Jesus eats, and talks, and laughs with sinners;
The love of God is out among the people who God loves;

The crowd is amazed, and the religious leaders are stunned. Everything has changed. We belong to the God of grace.

IV. Application

A few years ago when coming back from a mission trip in Sudan, Jeanne and I stayed a few days in Amsterdam. Our hotel room was in the old part of town on the harbor, and not much bigger than our queen-size bed. We had a great time. We liked the 500 year old buildings, and the narrow cobblestone streets. We liked riding the trains and boats on the canals. We liked the art and the culture. But the truth is, we were always tourists.

To be residents in this interesting city would mean more. We would need to move there and get a home. We would need to learn the language; Dutch. We would need to shop in the market, read the news, get to know the neighbors and find jobs. We would need to find a church. We would need to explore the city and countryside, and learn the politics. It would take time, but we would need to think and live in a different way. There is a difference between being a tourist and resident.

Everything has changed. That's Paul's point in our reading from Romans. We belong to the God of grace, and we live in the strange, new land of grace. We aren't just tourists who dabble in religious things. We are residents in a whole new country....all of us. And it may take time, but we need to think, believe, live and hope in a different way....like Jesus.

We live in a day of increasing division and conflict. Complex issues are often reduced to "for or against," republican or democrat, conservative or liberal. Rhetoric matters more listening.....extreme positions more than compromise.....pride more than humility.....pointing fingers more than solutions.....and as a result there's more foolishness than wisdom. And this raw, schismatic spirit finds its way into the church, and into the lives of Christians.

But on this Worldwide Communion Sunday Christians declare that we belong to the God of grace, and live in the strange, new land of grace. We gather around this one communion table not because of what we think, or who we are, or what we do, or even what we believe. We can only gather around this communion table because God's grace in Jesus Christ has done it all. Therefore, today we bear prophetic witness to the greatest truth; though we may believe different things about politics, gay ordination, abortion.....and be male or female, gay or straight, black/white/Asian/Latino/African, comfortable or struggling..... equality and unity are greater than division because we all live in this strange, new land of grace.

And we all have opportunity to live into being residents, and not tourists, as children of God's grace. This past week I was reminded of my own challenge. I am the co-chair of the team in our Presbytery trying lead churches in our Presbytery through this time of conflict over gay ordination. A few churches in our Presbytery will probably leave the PC(USA) over this issue, and some others are talking about it. I co-chair this team with my friend, Bill Hoffman, senior pastor at East Main Presbyterian Church. Bill and I get together to talk theology and ministry over coffee. We pray together and talk about the books we're reading. We agree on some things, disagree about others, and respect each other.

On the issue of gay ordination we agree on some things, and disagree on some others. Bill leans to the right, and reaches out to the left. I lean to the left, and reach out to the right. Most ministers and many elders in our Presbytery know this.....so they watch Bill and me....to see how we will live out this issue in our friendship with each other. We also want to lead a different way. Together in what we say, and how we act, we want to incarnate the greater truth; that though we don't agree on all things, we live together in this strange, new land of grace. I believe that all my 20 years of ministry and friendships in our Presbytery has brought me to this place. And I believe that the friendship that began 5 years ago with Bill when it happened that we were both elected as General Assembly delegates and roomed together as General Assembly was no accident. I pray and hope to be faithful to the call now before me as a resident in this strange, new land of grace.

The 16th C Heidelberg Catechism (1563) begins with the statement: "I belong, body and soul, in life and in death, not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ." (4.001)

The late 20th C Brief Statement of Faith begins with: "In life and in death we belong to God. Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel, whom alone we worship and serve."

Both statements of faith are in our PC(USA) Book of Confessions. Both confess "we belong to God." Both trust the God of grace. Both are sure "God's love wins." We are invited to confess, live and believe the same.....as residents, not tourists, in the strange, new land of God's grace.